

AT A DISTANCE OF YEARS:
THE NOVEL OF AGING IN THE SHADOW OF AUSCHWITZ

by

Anthony C. Wexler

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ABSTRACT

“At a Distance of Years: The Novel of Aging in the Shadow of Auschwitz” considers a group of *Vollendungsromane*, or novels of old age, written at the end of the twentieth century that all depict the subjective experience of old age so as to reckon with a larger historical development: the end of the “era of witnessing” connected to the aging and death of the community of Holocaust survivors. Contrary to depictions of late life that focus exclusively on the personal or universal aspects of the aging process, the works considered in this study reflect on, and respond to, the ways in which the memory of traumatic events begins to erode or become distorted with the passage of time. In works that disrupt the *Vollendungsroman* genre, Primo Levi, Philip Roth, Saul Bellow and J.M. Coetzee chronicle the exhaustion of testimonial authority in contemporary Holocaust discourse. These post-Holocaust *Vollendungsromane*, with their marked entwinement of personal and historical categories of experience, anticipate and resist the Holocaust’s fading from memory. At the same time, they self-consciously posit literature’s unique advantages in combatting the potential obsolescence of testimony. While the genre of the *Vollendungsroman* has not displaced the *Bildungsroman* in the postwar period, it has proven to be uniquely suited to writers at the end of the twentieth century struggling to make sense of what traumatic events like the Holocaust can and should mean in a world without witnesses.

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I feel the passage of years, of my years too. And as they pass, I can feel a
slippage in the way these memories are understood in the world.

– Primo Levi

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INTRODUCTION

“At a Distance of Years”

It is true that if an old man is dealt with in his subjective aspect he is not a good hero for a novel; he is finished, set, with no hope, no development to be looked for; as far as he is concerned it is all over and death already dwells within, so that nothing that can happen to him is of any importance.

– Simone de Beauvoir¹

Holocaust survivors will have to face the facts: as they grow weaker with age, Auschwitz is slipping out of their hands.

– Imre Kertész²

This study focuses on a group of *Vollendungsromane*, or novels of old age, written at the end of the twentieth century that depict the subjective experience of old age and deploy late style so as to reckon with a specific historical reality: the end of the “era of witnessing” connected to the aging and death of the community of Holocaust survivors.³ The depictions of late life in these works tend to fixate on experiences that occasion not only greater insight about the historical and biographical past, but also a keener

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. Patrick O’Brian (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1972), 210.

² Imre Kertész, “Who Owns Auschwitz?” trans. John MacKay, in *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (2001), 267.

³ Over the course of this study, I use “old age” and “late life” interchangeably. The terms refer to the final years of a long life when the organism experiences inevitable and irreversible deterioration and decline on account of its age. This definition, which echoes Helen Small’s account in *The Long Life*, applies to all the central characters considered in this study. By making old age, endings, and lateness the substance of these works, these writers not only take on the phenomenological experience of agedness, but also do so in ways that variously engage with the “discourse of lateness” in the literary field: a discourse that yokes stylistic changes to an artist’s personal development from youth to maturity. Over the last decade a growing number of critics and scholars have discussed the interface between old age and late style in full-length monographs. See, for example Helen Small, *The Long Life* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007); Gordon McMullan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing: Authorship in the Proximity of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007); and Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Vintage, 2007).

understanding of late-life and historical temporality itself. The post-Holocaust *Vollendungsromane* considered in this study dramatize what Robert Butler (the founder of gerontology in America) calls the “life review,” only to discover that characters’ aging makes them unequal to the task of sustaining historical memory of the Holocaust’s epochal trauma. Writers and characters find that their own memories, and the testimony they might offer or have offered in the past, are devolving, rather than culminating in late-life wisdom. I argue that these works, which range from Primo Levi’s last work, to novels by Philip Roth, Saul Bellow and J.M. Coetzee, approach the fading of the Holocaust from memory – a fading associated with aging and death of generation of those who lived through the war – in terms that seek to preempt and mitigate that fading. The varying balances they strike, between holding on and letting go of the memory of oppression, are the subject of this study.

In both their content and their use of late style, these works form a counter-tradition to the *Bildungsroman*. In *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, Franco Moretti points to the *Bildungsroman* as the “symbolic form of modernity” where the experience of youth most closely resembles the restless and future oriented experience of modernity. The *Bildungsroman*, says Moretti, abstracts from “real youth a symbolic one, epitomized...in mobility and interiority” (5), providing a crucible in which writers can represent a more general condition. Youth is chosen as the “new epochs’ specific material sign...Youth is...modernity’s ‘essence’, the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the future rather than in the past” (5). If youth offers a way of understanding modernity, old age at the end of the twentieth century speaks to an increasing concern not with the future, but with the past. The post-Holocaust

Vollendungsroman is driven by the imperative to review the century, and the traumatic events that defined it, from the “high world view of those who have lived long and seen it all” (Arnheim 150). The diminishing authority of long life, however, is the exact difficulty that these works seek to think through.

Since these works take the last phase of life as their starting point, they tend to focus on the same themes of interest to gerontologists: the arduous tasks of disengagement; the integrative work of the life review; coping with societal changes; intergenerational friction; feelings of anachronism and obsolescence; the loss of friends and family members; memory loss; physical decline; and stereotypical diminishment and marginalization. These themes have played an important role within the work of contemporary writers such as: Kingsley Amis (*Ending Up*), Vita Sackville-West (*All Passion Spent*), Margret Laurence (*The Stone Angel*) Dorris Lessing (“An old woman and her cat,” *The Diaries of Jane Somers*), and Iris Murdoch (*The Sea, The Sea*) among others. The aging characters in these works seek “some kind of affirmation in the face of loss,” some form of compensation for the changes brought on by age (248).⁴ And these writers tend to present late life as a period in the life cycle when the inevitable losses associated with age are compensated by the acquisition of knowledge, virtue, or new forms of connection.⁵ Indeed, the penchant for progress, which is the hallmark of the *Bildungsroman*, returns in somewhat muted form through the compensations associated with late life in a number of contemporary *Vollendungsromane*. These compensations,

⁴ The term *Vollendungsroman* (the novel of “completion” or “winding up”) was coined by Constance Rooke. For an overview of the place of the *Vollendungsroman* in contemporary fiction see Constance Rooke, “Old Age in Contemporary Fiction,” in *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging*, eds. Thomas R. Cole, *et al* (New York: Springer Publishing, 1992), 241-257.

⁵ For a list of *Vollendungsromane* that focus on the personal experience of aging see Constance Rooke, “Old Age in Contemporary Fiction,” in *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging*, eds. Thomas R. Cole, *et al* (New York: Springer Publishing, 1992), 256.

however, are routinely accompanied and compromised by powerful, painful late-life revelations.

We might take Bernard Malamud's wonderful short story "In Retirement" as an example of this process. At sixty-six, the widower, Dr. Morris, a man painfully aware of the social and psychological challenges associated with late life, struggles to accept his increasing isolation, the cost of growing old. After a chance event awakens his previously dormant sexuality, the aging doctor sets out to connect with a promiscuous young woman who lives in his building. To do so, he relies on a set of anachronistic social and sexual codes that only intensify his sense of alienation. The story foregrounds the tension between the doctor's reinvigorated sexual longings – feelings he assumed were long dormant – and the behaviors expected of a man of his age. His desire is mixed with shame and repulsion. While his training as a doctor has taught him that "bodies are bodies," he also knows, as a man navigating the waters of late life, that there is "no setting old age aside" (114, 122). I mention the story not because of how it resolves the aging doctor's dilemma, but rather as an example of a work about old age that sheds light on the cultural myths, which shape how we, as a culture, expect people to behave after a certain age.

By contrast, the post-Holocaust *Vollendungsromane* considered in this study, entwine the personal experience of late life, which involves the management of desire, with powerful and unavoidable reflections on the traumatic events that shaped the century. These concerns recur in the works of a number of contemporary authors – from the Italian writer and survivor, Primo Levi (whose last work is the subject of the first chapter), to Jewish American writers like Saul Bellow, Cynthia Ozick, and Philip Roth,

each of whom struggle with the chasm between European and American Jewish experience.⁶ In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, J.M. Coetzee adroitly uses Holocaust analogies and depicts the subjective experience of old age in order to reckon with the aging legacy of colonialism.

The reckoning of late life, furthermore, entails both an encounter with a future that does not include the self, and a coming to terms with one's earlier life and work. This has been true in late works by Primo Levi, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, which involve a recapitulation and reassessment of their earlier works. For instance, Levi's last work, *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), written a year before the author's death, is a long reflection on his first work, *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947), and Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost* (2007), the final installment of Roth's long-running Zuckerman series, looks back on and revises *The Ghost Writer* (1979), the *Bildungsroman* that began the series.⁷ Not surprisingly, the action of looking back on one's earlier work and life fuels powerful reflections on responsibility, complicity, and shame – reflections that lead to intergenerational friction and contribute to the feelings of anachronism and obsolescence that unite the genre and its narrators. While I focus primarily on single works in each chapter, I have chosen novelists for whom the category of old age and late style has been a recurrent, if not obsessive, theme in their work. One only needs to think of almost every Roth novel since the mid 1990s, or almost all of Coetzee's novels since *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), or the number of works by Saul Bellow that feature aging narrators,

⁶ Currently, this study focuses primarily on aging male writers and their aging male protagonists. In the manuscript version I aim to add a chapter on Cynthia Ozick's post-Holocaust *Vollendungroman*, *The Shawl* (1989). The chapter will put Ozick's novel in conversation with her criticism of Holocaust literature and her powerful deconstruction of Primo Levi's image in "The Suicide Note" (1988). In discursive fields dominated by men (Holocaust history and Jewish-American literature), I will consider how gender informs the life trajectory of Ozick's aging literary survivor.

⁷ Alvin Rosenfeld describes Levi's first work as an inversion of the *Bildungsroman*, a work that foregrounds the process of having to unlearn what it means to be civilized ("Double" 29).

to get a sense of what I mean by an obsessive interest in old age as both a formal and thematic choice.

I

The return of painful memories from the past is the central challenge of the life review. Gerontologists like Robert Butler and developmental psychologists like Erik Erikson describe integration of those painful memories as the essential *task* of late life.¹⁰ Butler was one of the first to formalize the idea of the life review as a discernible, distinct psychological phenomenon. He described it as a “universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts” (“Life Review” 487). Where theological accounts of late life emphasize the work of spiritual accounting that proceeds death, Butler sees the return of the past as a reaction to the “realization of approaching dissolution and death, and the inability to maintain one’s personal sense of invulnerability” (“Life Review” 487). Faced with impending psychic and physical dissolution, the psyche seeks to integrate repressed memories from the past in order to create a coherent life narrative.

For the aging Holocaust survivor, whose life has been committed to the act of bearing witness and the preservation of memory, the challenges of late life, and the work of the life review, have been felt with special intensity. Henry Kyrstal, a psychoanalyst who worked with aging survivors, provides a helpful account of the difficulties they faced in later years. According to Kyrstal, the integrative work of the life review requires that the aging individual “acquiesce to the ‘accidental coincidence of but one life cycle

¹⁰ See Erik Erikson, *The Lifecycle Completed* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998).

with but one segment of history” (83). This means that he or she, in the process of looking back on life, must come to view “one’s own life cycle and...the people who have become significant to it as something that *had to be*, and that, by necessity, it accepted no substitutions” (83). Moreover, the effort to integrate the past requires the aging survivor to re-encounter “the helplessness and the *shame* of the past” (83). For the survivor, this would mean accepting as inevitable the alignment of his or her whole life with the events of the Holocaust. As a result, the aging survivor tends to regard the integrative work of the life review as a form of betrayal, a way of granting Hitler a posthumous victory. “To them,” Krystal says, “self-integration appears antithetical to the only justification of their survival – that they are obliged to be angry witnesses against the outrage of the Holocaust” (83). The sense of fidelity towards the past overrides the personal desire for integration, and the aging survivor, unwilling to assimilate events of the Holocaust, remains an angry witness to the events that defined his or her life. For the victim consumed with the memory of oppression, aging was not experienced exclusively as a personal problem; instead, it is imagined as direct challenge to the central instrument of continuity: collective memory.

The subjective experience of growing old threatens what I refer to as a “protectionist approach” to memory, one that refuses to accept the inevitable end of the era of living witnesses. This approach has become increasingly common, if not ubiquitous, in recent years. In “Who Owns Auschwitz,” the Nobel Prize winner, Imre Kertész, sheds light on this approach. Envisioning the end of the Holocaust as an event witnessed and remembered, he points to the jealous ways in which the aging survivors “insist on their exclusive rights to the Holocaust as intellectual property”

as though they'd come into possession of some great and unique secret; as though they were protecting some unheard-of treasure from decay and (especially) from willful damage. Only then are they able to guard it from decay, through the strength of their memory. But how are they to respond to the damage wrought by others, to all the falsifications and sundry manipulations, and above all to that most powerful of enemies, the passage of time itself? (267)

With the “dying-away of the living sensation of the Holocaust,” the survivors remain engaged in an impossible battle trying to guard the event against the damage caused by others, and inevitable impact of time on memory. Attempting to transmit the events of the past to a new generation – to those who see the events as essentially belonging to the generation of their grandparents – involves an important change of contexts as well, as the Holocaust comes to be reinterpreted within new social, historical, and political contexts.¹¹ This transition has led to the “stylization of the Holocaust.” Kertész, in fact, claims that this has already reached “nearly unbearable dimensions” (268). The price seems too high for the aging survivor, for whom stylization is synonymous with the act of forgetting; or, worse, with morally complacent or self-serving “falsifications and sundry manipulations” that mask painful, shameful memories of complicity.¹²

¹¹ Marianne Hirsch, in her own work on “postmemory,” describes the process along the same lines: At stake is precisely the ‘guardianship’ of a traumatic personal and generational past with which some of us have a ‘living connection’ and that past’s passing into history. At stake is not only a personal/familial/generational sense of ownership and protectiveness but also an evolving theoretical discussion about the workings of trauma, memory, and intergenerational acts of trauma, a discussion actively taking place in numerous important contexts outside of Holocaust studies. (104)

¹² A large number of survivors, Holocaust writers and theorists, have pointed to the extent to which such stylization threatens to betray the events in question. The bibliography here is far too vast to cite. The following works discuss the topic at some length: Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1994); James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative*

The figure of the aging survivor, then, dramatizes the tension between the desire to preserve trauma as a source of collective memory and solidarity, and the desire to let it go, and to adapt and adjust to the possibility of an alternative future. Norma Rosen describes the struggle – to protect the Holocaust from its inevitable slide into the literary imagination and the historical archive – as the “pathology of Holocaust hoarding”, whose chief symptom is the dogged refusal “to let images embark, as they must, on their second life” (58).¹³ For the aging survivor, however, letting go of the “images” triggers fear of complicity with the very genocidal project that sought to destroy them. This uncompromising survivor refuses to accept that the event of the Holocaust cannot be guarded against the passage of time and inevitable decay. More specifically, such survivors feel that they cannot accept the vexing, almost traitorous appropriation of the Holocaust by literature. The testimony of living witnesses – unmediated, inviolate, authoritative – is upstaged by the inventive, imaginative fiction of celebrity authors. The *Vollendungsroman*, as we’ll see, is a genre uniquely suited to demonstrating (and, in some cases, resolving) this kind of tension between holding on and letting go. These works depict, and even enact, the forced choice between zealously guarding the memory of oppression, and a willingness to let that memory evolve, change, and adapt to new conditions and new contexts. It is a genre that, similar to autobiographical narratives of various kinds, functions as a kind of fictional hinge between memory and history.

and the Consequences of Interpretation (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990); Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana UP 1988); and Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

¹³ See Cynthia Ozick’s endorsement of Rosen’s position in “Roundtable Discussion,” in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988)

II

The post-Holocaust *Vollendungsroman*, has developed, of course, amidst a variety of discourses – theoretical, historical, archival – that have sought to protect Holocaust memory against the passage of time. More precisely, as the Holocaust began “crossing the shadow line from contemporary history,” a period in which the “historian still has to compete with the memories of the living witnesses,” to remote history, a time when the historian can “claim the unrivaled authority of a reconstructor and interpreter,” critics and survivors have struggled to find ways to protect the memory of oppression for the sake of group identity (Assmann 271).

The literature of testimony and the genre of video testimony are two technologies through which collective memory can be engineered and transmitted. The effort to preserve the memory of the Holocaust certainly intensified as a result of the growing awareness about the aging and death of the community of Holocaust survivors. In response, major institutions began the international task of recording and storing survivor testimonies, beginning with the establishment of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University in 1979. Since then, a number of large institutions, both in America and Israel, have worked tirelessly to track down and record survivor testimonies from around the world.¹⁵ The genre of video testimony, argues Alieida Assmann, has the unique ability to forge what she calls a “transgenerational” link between the victims and those who listen to them. Through the experience of watching

¹⁵ In the 1990s, Steven Spielberg established the USC Shoah Foundation and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum created the International Database of Oral History Testimonies. The latter provides access to at least 115,000 testimonies worldwide.

these testimonies, she argues, we can connect the “the enormous and abstract event of the Holocaust with the concrete voice and face of an individual” (Assmann 272).¹⁶

To date, however, the most prominent response to the ticking clock of history has come from within literary theory. Specifically, some critics have developed an account of the power of literature to enact and transmit the traumatic experience in such a way that abolishes time and dissolves place. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, testimonial literature was theorized as a source of unique power vis-à-vis history: the power, through an encounter with the testimonial work, to actually transmit the experience of trauma to one who did not actually live through the historical events in question. This understanding of trauma and testimonial literature has been associated with the work of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub among others.¹⁷

Caruth describes the traumatic event as a “missed experience.” For her, the failure to apprehend the traumatic experience at the moment of its occurrence becomes the basis for its universality: “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (EM 8).¹⁸ The subject’s failure to apprehend the traumatic experience at the moment of its occurrence becomes formally analogous to the impact that the testimonial (or traumatic)

¹⁶ For Assmann, the setting of video testimony places the viewer into the position of the interviewer, and, by extension, into the role of the “belated daughter or grandson” (271). This is the point, says Assmann, “where testimony acquires the quality of *testament*: an *intergenerational* memory is transformed into a *transgenerational* memory. It is through the genre of video testimonies that the rights of memory can be restored in a future era of history and the experience of the Holocaust can maintain its status as ‘contemporary history,’ supported by living memories” (271). In this way – to use Marianne Hirsch’s language – the video testimonies become a key source for the production of “postmemory.”

¹⁷ See Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

¹⁸ A number of scholars and critics have pointed to the flaws in this this line of thought. I describe it here only in order to contrast it with the efforts of the post-Holocaust *Vollendungsroman*.

text has on the reader. The discontinuity that defines the traumatic experience is re-enacted through the discontinuity generated by the reading experience. Both, according to Caruth, inspire a form of continuity based on a shared failure to connect with the events in question. Through the encounter with the testimonial text, the reader can get a sense of the unclaimed experience, a move that allows them – even though they were not there at the moment of the events occurrence – to take part in the continuity associated with collective memory.

This ambitious account of literature's historical purchase addresses the generational crisis of Holocaust witnessing and representation. For many other critics and scholars, the Holocaust has become an event that is unknowable, unrepresentable, and unspeakable.¹⁹ This position, which has exerted such a powerful influence over contemporary trends of thought, transforms the Holocaust into a sacred event that remains impervious to understanding and representation. This dispensation is routinely described as the *sacralization* of the Holocaust.²⁰ It would seem, then, that sacralization and theories of traumatic reading are polar opposites: the former proscribes most Holocaust representations as venal and, therefore, rightfully given to aesthetic and moral failure; the latter promises testimonial texts' enduring, exclusive advantages. But despite these seemingly opposed outcomes, we may see in both sacralizing discourse, and in

¹⁹ History, as such, becomes an all or nothing proposition: Either it is something that can be collapsed through an account of the past as it is understood through the lens of trauma theory, or it is that which must be defended against any forms of stylization, and known only through bound representations. Both approaches, as Sanyal points out, risks forms of violence (20). Sanyal explains the tension as follows:

To be sure, there is no question that to make the past knowable through bound representations can indeed be a violent act. But there exists a comparable violence in making the past unknowable by claiming this unknowability (silence, trauma, shame) to be the underlying reality of psychic and historical constitution. The unknowable, unspeakable, and unrepresentable can also function as alibis for identification and appropriation. (20)

²⁰ This move has led some to regard the Holocaust as a new form of civil religion. See Avishai Margalit and Gabriel Motzkin, "The Uniqueness of the Holocaust," in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25.1 (1996), 66.

theories of traumatic reading, a shared privileging of the *formal* and *affective* properties of Holocaust representations and their circulation. Form is always already inadequate, and therefore induces affective responses that are unequal to the Holocaust's sacred gravitas. Or alternatively, form (specifically, the occlusions inherent in literary form) leads readers' affective responses to approach, and even arrive at, legitimate comprehension of the Holocaust. Importantly, both discourses take on Holocaust literature in the *abstract*, as either irredeemably distant from the specifics of traumatic experience, or channeling traumatic experience as an abstraction in itself.²¹

By locating trauma beyond reference, the specificity of the events are deracinated from their location in the historical past and understood, instead, in terms of the capacity to generate a shared set of effects. Debarti Sanyal sums up this transformation as follows:

Transformed from fact to concept, the Holocaust becomes the matrix for a set of interchangeable traumas. In this view the “fait concentrationnaire,” or concentration-camp universe, is no longer a dreadful historical fact experienced by survivors. It is an ongoing metaphorical, cultural and psychic condition that circulates from one subject – and history – to another. (16)

This mobile and ahistorical account of the Holocaust relies on testimonial literature as a medium that transmits and preserves trauma across historical distance. Given the fact of the inevitable aging and death of the last survivors, one can see the appeal of this claim

²¹ Similarly, we might think of Caruth's affirmation of literature's transhistorical power to relate trauma, and Adorno's account of complicity through aesthetic representation, as mirror opposites of each other. Both conceive of the Holocaust as an experience that requires *formal* fidelity if literature is to tread upon it: either the formal intransigence to meaning that Adorno seeks, or the formal rupturing privileged by contemporary trauma theory that re-inscribes traumatic experience for the reader. Just as the former might result in a complicit silence, the latter threatens to become self-aggrandizing in its claims to transhistorical traumatic repetition. Both lines of thought, however, locate the truth-value and ethical integrity of Holocaust representation in literary form itself.

for trauma literature's historical leverage. Critics such as Walter Benn Michaels, Ruth Leys, Debarti Sanyal and Dominick LaCapra have contested trauma theory's efforts to blend history and memory, and have disputed both its logic, and its real-world implications.²² Sanyal, for example, finds in trauma theory an "overwhelming theoretical investment in contamination, complicity and victimization," an investment that has led to the "derealization of history and the circulation of innocence and guilt" (12). The theory of testimony and traumatic reading seeks to elude the impact of time on memory, in order to preserve the historical event through the *unintelligible* dimensions of the literary text, which operate through form and affect – rather than through theme, intention, content, or style; such unintelligibility, it follows, successfully supplants our knowledge of history, and perhaps even history itself. It is precisely this conceit of formal, affective transmission – immune to the passage of time and the vicissitudes of context – that the post-Holocaust *Vollendungsroman* challenges.

The post-Holocaust *Vollendungsroman*, I argue, presents an important alternative to the theory of testimony and the ethical imperative that underwrites it (in addition to dismissing in advance the Holocaust's sacralization). Against the backdrop of the biological battle against matter, the works in this study grapple with the very things that the theory of testimony attempts to collapse: the increasing gap between the past and the present, between American and European Jewish experience, between the role of trauma for oneself and for those who have only read about it, between the way one thinks about the Holocaust from the vantage point of late life as compared to the ways he or she spoke

²² See, for example, Debarti Sanyal's "A Soccer Match in Auschwitz: Passing Culpability in Holocaust Criticism," *Representations* 79 (2002); "Amy Hungerford's "Memorizing Memory," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (2000); Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001); and Ruth Leys critique of Cathy Caruth in *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), 266-97.

and wrote about the Holocaust as a younger person. The *Vollendungsroman* focuses on increasing pressure to submit to the inevitable facts that persist regardless of theoretical abstraction: not just that one will grow old and die, but that one's life and one's legacy, similar to the events that have shaped it, will inevitably fall into the hands of a younger generation preoccupied by new traumas, and reliant on different interpretive codes and contexts. Instead of bearing witness to traumatic events, the aging characters in the works I consider bear witness to the changes in the way those memories are understood in the world, and how, at a distance of years, such memories take on different—and at times disturbing or seemingly perverse—meaning and power for those who carry them.

III

Where the theory of testimony seeks to bridge the past and the present, the novels of old age remind us that such bridges are, finally, the stuff of fiction; they do so by replacing *literary form* with the *individual lifespan* and *late style* as the arbiters of Holocaust memory. Acutely aware of the universal inevitability of death, these writers dwell on the ongoing pain of the Holocaust on the one hand, and, a future in which the Holocaust will become an event without witnesses, on the other hand. In addition to intervening in ongoing debates about the Holocaust, these writers and their works draw upon a longstanding body of thought about the relationship between aging and literary style.

There have been two dominant critical approaches to this relation, each with a different account of the connection between lived life and its narration. On the one hand,

we have critics who focus largely on biographical readings of late works, and on the alignment of stylistic changes with the artist's development from youth to maturity. This position—which extends a Romantic notion of individual artistic autonomy prevailing over its social or historical epoch—takes life as a process of narrative continuity, one commonly referred to as a *narrative view of lives*.²³ An early, formative example of this approach is Cicero's description of old age as the "last act" of a long life in his *De Senectute*; subsequent accounts have relied heavily on Cicero's work. Cicero famously claims that the quality of old age is determined solely by the quality of the individual's life choices thus far. From this Stoicist notion, in which the individual is responsible for the quality of his old age, we can see how the narrative continuity between youth and age becomes the precondition for assessing the overall quality of a life: If we live well in our youth and prime, we will come to enjoy all the fruits of our labors in old age; honor, wisdom, and authority are the dividends we receive from a well-invested youth. As Cicero says: "For if they have been maintained at every period – if one has lived much as well as long – the harvest they produce is wonderful...because the consciousness of a well-spent life and the recollection of many virtuous actions are exceedingly delightful" (48). This position understands old age and late style as a personal, rather than historical or social phenomenon, and it allows us to make further general claims about the ways that artistic style changes over time. The Ciceronian view was amenable, as we can see, to Romantic bids for artistic autonomy and triumph.

²³ For an account of the claim that lives are comprehensible only in narrative term see Alasdair MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1985). For a critique of MacIntyre's position see Galen Strawson, "A Fallacy of Our Age: Not Every Life is a Narrative," in *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 Oct. 2004, 13-15.

Roughly until World War II, the Romantic urge to locate stylistic development in the life of the individual rather than the period or context persisted, and was the dominant position when it came to assessment of late works and late style, especially.²⁴ This account imagines old age as a period in which physical and cognitive losses are replaced by new forms of development and knowledge. While aging entails physical decline, and the inevitable loss of one's sexual capacities, this diminishment is offset by the acquisition of knowledge and virtue. In this way, the penchant for progress that underwrites the *Bildungsroman* and upward mobility narratives is at play in life's last act as well. As indicated earlier, the majority of contemporary *Vollendungsromane* (in contrast to what I call the post-Holocaust *Vollendungsroman*) present old age along these lines.

On the other hand, we have a theory of late style and an understanding of old age as both anti-biographical and a rejection of historical transcendence. In their various ways, Simon De Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* (1970), Jean Améry's *At the Mind's Limits* and *On Aging: Revolt and Resignation* (1966 and 1968), Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), Theodor Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1966) and *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems* (1965) and Edward Said's *On Late Style* (2006), share this understanding of late life and late style. Indeed, the difficulty, anger and intransigence that characterizes the late works (and late style) that interest Said can be read as an effect of his own secular understanding of death as a limit experience, one that brings with it no hope of renewal. For the writers and thinkers in this camp, old age is imagined as a period of increasing disbelief in art and its redemptive powers; Adorno

²⁴ For an informative discussion of this topic see Gordon McMullan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing: Authorship in the Proximity of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 1-23.

describes this period as one of progressive deepening. As Said says about Adorno: “lateness is the idea of surviving beyond what is acceptable and normal; in addition, lateness included the idea that one cannot really go beyond lateness at all, cannot transcend or live oneself out of lateness, but can only deepen the lateness” (“On Late Style” 13). In so far as these thinkers reflect on the relation of old age and late style, they all understand the end of life as a period of radical transformation, one that threatens to render the self unrecognizable. In the process, they displace a narrative account of life that deals in continuity and progress with one defined by discontinuity and progressive loss. Importantly, this account of life is informed by the same sense of rupture that characterizes the traumas of the twentieth century itself.

De Beauvoir and Améry’s works on aging, published in 1970 and 1968 respectively, helped shed light on the state of the elderly within modern society, and on the myths that distort our understanding of the old.²⁵ In de Beauvoir’s account, old age has become “society’s secret shame”: a period of life that is largely kept from public view. These works focus, in different ways, on the meaning of late life within secular modern cultures that have come to see old aged not in terms of the accumulation of experiences and wisdom, but as a scientific problem to be solved, or, alternatively, as a period within the life course when one is defined by one’s uselessness with regards to capitalist production.²⁶

In his book, *On Aging: Revolt and resignation*, published in 1968, the Holocaust survivor and writer Jean Améry actively pushes against stereotypical accounts of late life.

²⁵ Interestingly, 1970 was also the year when Saul Bellow’s post-Holocaust *Vollendungsroman*, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, was published. Bellow’s aging and anti-sentimental survivor will be discussed in chapter three.

²⁶ For scholars working in age studies these have been central concerns. See, for example, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged By Culture* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2004).

Refusing any specious forms of consolation, Améry seeks to destroy the false consolations that we rely on to shield ourselves from the reality of old age. He wants to make it impossible to look away from the period in the lifecycle when we become “unfit for this and that, unteachable, unfruitful, unwelcome, unhealthy, un-young” (“On Aging” xvii).²⁷ At the end of the work, he provides a compact account of old age as a “desolate region of life, lacking any reasonable consolation” (OA 127). Améry explains:

When we have passed beyond the prime of life, society forbids us to continue to project ourselves into the future, and a culture becomes a burdensome culture that we no longer understand, that instead gives us to understand that, as scrap iron of the mind, we belong to the waste heaps of the epoch. (OA 128)

De Beauvoir, like Améry and Adorno, is similarly interested in old age under the conditions of late capitalism. Echoing Améry’s description, de Beauvoir describes the old as the waste emitted from the “machine”: a capitalist machine that leaves the old man “exhausted and naked” with “nothing left but his eyes to weep with (543). In contrast to the possibility and hope that traverses *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir’s work on aging sheds light on a condition defined by the impossibility of change or escape. She ends by rejecting the efforts to enact any changes in “old-age policy, higher pensions, decent housing and organized leisure”; instead she says, “it is our whole system that is at issue and our claim cannot be otherwise than radical – change life itself” (543). These pessimistic accounts of old age define the condition in terms of devaluation, and they

²⁷ Hereafter abbreviated OA and cited parenthetically in the text.

reflect an important shift in the ways that old age is described during a historical period that has seen the rise of gerontology and geriatric medicine.²⁸

In *The Coming of Age*, De Beauvoir posits old age as a deeply contingent state, necessarily embedded in the vicissitudes of class, race, and gender. Where Cicero emphasizes continuity between youth and age, De Beauvoir – echoing the account of late style advanced by Adorno and Said – sees rupture and discontinuity as aging’s main features. Growing old entails detachment from the world and oneself; the old figure is defined by the loss of the future, when one comes to submit to the “alien eye,” i.e. the outsider’s point of view (289). It is not a period continuous with youth, but instead one that exposes the discontinuities that have been present all along. Where Cicero thinks of old age as a period of narrative completion, De Beauvoir describes it as a state beyond or outside of narrative interest, a state of life when one is no longer even interesting. And it is for this reason, she argues, that subjective experience of old age has played such a minor role within the history of the novel.

De Beauvoir offers the following explanation to account for the absence of novels narrated by or focused on elderly characters. This, of course, is not a claim about the presence of old characters within novels – something there has been no shortage of – but novels explicitly focalized by an old character (or a character who understands himself or herself to be old). De Beauvoir explains:

It is true that if an old man is dealt with in his subjective aspect he is not a good hero for a novel; he is finished, set, with no hope, no development to be looked

²⁸ See, for example, Robert Butler, *Why Survive: Being Old in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1975); and Thomas R. Cole, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992).

for; as far as he is concerned it is all over and death already dwells within, so that nothing that can happen to him is of any importance. (210)³⁰

Apparently, an old character dealt with in their subjective aspect, is unfit for the novel's special purchase on development. With no hope and no promise of development, an aging character would be unable to sustain a reader's interest. Helen Small, in a recent study that examines late life through the lens of literary and philosophical sources, offers a similar account of old age. Small explains: "[Old age] describes a change in condition (a gradual one over time), not a terminal event, and it can cause serious difficulty for an account of a good life which invests heavily in the idea of 'bringing to completion'" (100). Aging, then, undercuts our most basic assumptions of the narrative shape of life and our desire to understand those lives as things that improve over time; hence old age's marginalization in the history of the novel. The Holocaust, however, has compelled thinkers to revisit old age as both an artistic and historical trope, with far-reaching theoretical consequences for our understanding of late style.

Most prominently, Theodor Adorno compares the lives of the very old with the inmates of the concentration camps. Adorno offers the most significant and theoretically developed approach to late style in the postwar period, which Edward Said extends in his own work on the subject. He does so, at least in part, because late style and old age offer him a way of thinking against what he diagnoses as an association between continuity and complicity. In his account, late style offers a way to challenge the kind of mastery that fiction assumes over the events it describes. While Adorno shares an interest in late

³⁰ In *On Aging: Revolt and Resignation*, Jean Améry similarly describes old age as a posthumous state: "The life of the aging, which we have called memory linked to time in another place and have set over and against the young existence, which promises world and space, is, as far as its cultural benefits are concerned, nothing more than a cadaver" (101-2).

style that straddles the personal and epochal, and while he sees late style in terms of an important caesura in the artist's life, he does not seek to locate late style in the facts of the artist's life. The story about lateness that Adorno tells, similar to de Beauvoir and Amery's accounts, is not one about organic, linear growth that results in a coherent account of a life from youth to maturity. Instead, late style exposes the illusory hopes behind such narrative projects, and thereby reveals the end of the artist's attempts at formal mastery.³¹ Having abandoned conventions – the formal features that produce the “harmony that the classicist aesthetic is in the habit of demanding from works of art” (LS 564) – these late works (and he is speaking primarily about Beethoven's late works here) are left to break off, as fragments that the artist can no longer master.³² As these the fragments splinter off, Adorno claims, “they themselves finally revert to expression; no longer, at this point, an expression of the solitary I, but of the mythical nature of created being and its fall, whose steps the late works strike symbolically as if in the momentary pauses of their descent” (“Music” 564).

Adorno, however, was interested not only in late style as a specific mode of aesthetic production that resists ideological unity, but also in narrating the lives of the old, and the ways in which old age can shed light on how we understand the events of the Holocaust and its aging legacy. The two interests are brought together in his lectures from

³¹ By turning away from the subjective experience of the artist, and from the claims of subjectivism more generally, Adorno looks for the signs of lateness in the force of subjectivity itself, as it is confronted with its own impotence.

³² Consider the following passage from Adorno's early essay, “Late Style in Beethoven”:

The power of subjectivity in the late works of art is the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves. It breaks their bonds, not in order to express itself, but in order, expressionless, to cast off the appearance of art. Of the late works themselves it leaves only fragments behind and communicates itself, like a cipher, only through the blank spaces from which it has disengaged itself. Touched by death, the hand of the master sets free the masses of material that he used to form; it tears and it fissures, witnesses to the finite powerlessness of the I confronted with Being are its final work. (LS 566)

1965 and *Negative Dialectics*. In both these works, Adorno claims that the figures of the very old dramatize the impact of the caesura that was made abundantly clear in the camps. In the aftermath of Auschwitz, the ideal of life as “something stretching out in time so that it can be narrated, and rounded off in its own death” was rendered obsolete (“Metaphysics” 134). Death, says Adorno, can no longer enter the individual’s “empirical life as somehow conformable with the course of that life” (“Negative” 362). The experience of the inmates, of the “socially condemned,” finds an important point of contact for Adorno with the image of the elderly: they both force a confrontation with the fact that the core of man can be destroyed, leaving behind nothing but a husk or shell that bears no resemblance to the former self.

Any attractive notion about the relation between lives and narratives, or the ability to understand the end of life in relation to its beginning, had become for Adorno a way of looking away from the reality of suffering (“Metaphysics” 134). The camps made the narrative view of lives impossible, or, more specifically, revealed the illusory quality of such a continuous account of the self over the course of a life; the figures of the very old reveal much the same. Just as the camps are unintelligible from what precedes and comes after them, old age is neither a culmination of past life, nor a herald of end-of-life redemption. In this sense, we can see how he shifts the problem of old age that de Beauvoir describes as problem internal to literature (how the old are situated with regards to the future), into a more general and historical problem about the relation of lives and narratives that the old force us to confront.

Discourses on aging, the Holocaust, and trauma converge for the authors and works in this study. The old have been invoked as a synecdoche of the larger issues

regarding representation and ethics after Auschwitz, as figures who carry the problem forward in ways, as we will see, that have become important to a number of novelists seeking to clarify and comprehend the legacy of traumatic events, as they register the aging and death of those communities that lived through them. In the post-Holocaust *Vollendungsromans* I consider, we can see the reflexive turn these novels make: they are attuned to the process – and struggle – by which historical events find their new home in fiction; the growing distance between events as they happened and events as they come to be remembered and narrated grows in magnitude and importance. Through the subjective experience of old age, these works bear witness to the slide towards simplification and stereotype, without being able to actively intervene; it is this failure to control the Holocaust's historical legacy, and the reckoning with that failure, that become the basis for new forms of understanding and imagining how traumatic events might be preserved from one generation to the next.

III

The first chapter focuses on Primo Levi's last work *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986). In his last work, Levi entwines personal fears about his own memory loss and declining strength, with larger concerns about the future of Holocaust memory. These concerns, I argue, have made him a crucial figure for novelists struggling at the end of the twentieth century to make sense of what traumatic events like the Holocaust can and should mean in a world without witnesses. And his emergence from near obscurity to wide acclaim in the 1980s was engineered in large part by favorable reviews by other

authors considered in this study. In contrast to Elie Wiesel, the most famous survivor in America, Levi's sober historiography, documentary writing, and secular humanism have made him the favorite survivor of the American intellectual class.

I seek to explain how Primo Levi, at the end of his life and in his last work, approached the fading of the Holocaust from memory — the personal memories of survivors — in terms that sought to preempt and arrest its fading from history. For Levi, whose life had been committed to the act of bearing witness, aging and the passage of time were felt with special intensity. In interviews during the 1980s, he repeatedly connected his personal experience of growing old with the “fatal slide” of Holocaust memory: “I feel the passage of the years, of my years too,” he said in a 1986 interview with Giorgio Colcagno: “And as they pass, I can feel the slippage in the way these memories are understood in the world” (“Voice of Memory” 110).³³ For Levi, the effort to arrest this “slippage,” became the central challenge of his last work.

Some critics, reading Levi's suicide backwards into his last book, treat his last book as little more than a reflection of the author's life. Others turn to the concept of the gray zone, finding in its circulation of innocence and guilt a metaphor for contemporary life; they stress the gray zone's implications for conceptions of history, subjectivity, and ethics.³⁴ My reading, which sees the theory and the biography as intimately linked, focuses on how Levi's anxieties regarding the aging process, and the impact of time on memory, drive his last work's pedagogical mission, or what I refer to as its “late strategy.”

³³ Hereafter *The Voice of Memory: Interviews 1961-1987*, will be abbreviated VOM and cited parenthetically in text.

³⁴ See Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002). Agamben recasts the gray zone as a traumatic state of complicity experienced by all secondary witnesses. For Agamben, the gray zone of violence and ambiguity becomes the hidden yet constant paradigm for modern civilian life.

Levi, I argue, is not only *representing* but also *responding* to the problem of age and the fading of Holocaust memory in the chapter on the gray zone. He turns to this zone of ambiguity, which temporarily confuses our “need to judge,” in order to disabuse his readers of simplistic accounts of the Holocaust as a narrative about Nazi monsters and innocent victims — a move, I argue, that aims to sustain his readers’ *active* and *moral relationship* to the events of the Holocaust, even as the generation who survived them age and die, taking their testimony with them.

In other words, Levi’s late strategy responds to the very temporal and representative chasm that the theory of testimony attempts to bridge. Where the theory of testimony aims to bridge the gap through the formal action of the testimonial text, which transforms the reader into the victim of the unmediated experience, Levi seeks to cultivate, through his emphasis on the ambiguity and confusion associated with the gray zone, his reader’s self-conscious willingness to recognize his or her own capacity for evil through his or her identification with the “gray specimens” who inhabited the camps. To build my case, I concentrate on the specific path Levi follows over the course of the gray zone chapter.

Levi’s rendering of the gray zone has moved beyond the realm of Holocaust studies. The description of a zone so disorienting that it cannot be fully understood, and which prevents facile forms of assimilation, has become, in the hands of subsequent writers, associated with the zone of fiction itself. The gray zone’s blurring of orienting boundaries, which looks back to a universe so different from the one we inhabit after Auschwitz, can be aligned with literature’s subversion of any kind of moral, ethical, biographical or political considerations. Furthermore, Levi’s heuristic of the gray zone

serves as a powerful model for novelists seeking to resist readings of their works as simple expositions of the author's life. How these shared concerns, which only intensify with age, inform *Exit Ghost* (2007), the final installment of Philip Roth's long running Zuckerman series, is the subject of the second chapter.

The second chapter compares Roth's use of Anne Frank in *The Ghost Writer*, a *Bildungsroman* and the first installment of Roth's Zuckerman series, with his late life reflections on Primo Levi's legacy in *Exit Ghost*, a post-Holocaust *Vollendungsroman* and the final book in the series. I argue that Levi's conceptions of old age, complicity, and generational distance are crucial for a proper understanding of Roth's novel, because they shed light on both the motivations and the limitations of the late-life alliance that the novel depicts between two Jews with very different twentieth-century biographies: the seventy-one-year-old American writer, Nathan Zuckerman, and the seventy-five-year-old Holocaust survivor, Amy Bellette. The novel, I argue, synthesizes Nathan's fears about the end of his career as a writer with concerns about the end of Holocaust memory – concerns represented by Amy's aging body and brain. Like Levi's last work, it, too, looks for ways to protect the historical events and works of art from the inevitable simplifications brought on by the passage of time. To make sense of these fears, and to shed light on her dead lover's struggle to produce a novel at the end of his own life, Amy turns to Primo Levi. Where the earlier novel, *The Ghost Writer*, hinged on the idea of the vast gulf between the European genocide and Jewish life in America, in *Exit Ghost* the experience of the universal constraints of late life allow the distance between the American Zuckerman and the European Bellette to be temporarily, if only fictionally, collapsed.

In the third chapter, I turn from Roth's efforts to find shelter for these aging survivors and writers within the work itself, to Saul Bellow's *The Bellarosa Connection* (1989), a late work that registers and affirms the vast distance separating American and European Jews and their respective memories of atrocity. Where Roth's Zuckerman experiences the physical and cognitive decline associated with late life, Bellow's septuagenarian American narrator, who remains unnamed over the course of the narrative, is not afflicted by the same symptoms. He is, however, actively engaged in the work of the life review.

For Bellow, late life has less to do with the cognitive and physical decline commonly associated with old age, and more to do with the way that collective history supervenes on the work of the individual life review. For aging Jews at the end of the twentieth century, the life review is not simply autobiographical or individual in scope. Instead, he shows us the extent to which the life review is a historically and geopolitically conditioned process; one that forces aging American Jews to reflect on the pre-American and non-English Jewish past. Remarkably, this intrusion of Jewish history in late life affects even upwardly mobile American Jews like Bellow – and his aging narrator – whose lives were not directly affected by the Holocaust, who identify with America, and who no longer take part in Jewish religious traditions. In this way, the work of the life review presents a clear and direct challenge to the process of assimilation – a process that links Bellow's anxiety in *The Bellarosa Connection* to the anxiety that animates Primo Levi's last work, *The Drowned and the Saved*. While they might not share a solution, they do reflect on the same problem.

I argue that Bellow's novella is not merely *about* the difficulty of remembering the Holocaust in America, but rather, that it reflects on the impossibility of remembering the Holocaust *because* of America. In the process, Bellow resists the fading of memory over time by keeping his attention focused on the differences between European and American Jewish memories of atrocity. Where Philip Roth uses the universal constraints of old age to foster a literary community between an American writer and a European survivor, and to give shelter to ghosts of Holocaust writers real and imagined within his novel, Bellow uses old age, and the work of the life-review in order to expose the distance between the unnamed American narrator and the European survivor, a distance that prevents the Holocaust from being assimilated within American culture.

In the fourth and final chapter I turn from Levi's impact on Jewish American writers to consider how the same issues take shape in *Disgrace*, a *Vollendungsroman* written by the South African writer, J.M. Coetzee. Where Levi and the Jewish American writers struggle to respond to the impact of time on memory, and the ways that Holocaust memory was being rendered unrecognizable with the passage of time, Coetzee reflects on the issue of traumatic history through the figure of a late representative of empire. Where the other writers want to preserve something of the past, Coetzee, I argue, is seeking to palliate that past: to find a way to lay to rest the members of the generation who were meant to benefit from Apartheid. In so doing, Coetzee demonstrates for us the larger import and relevance of Holocaust discourse on literary treatments of world historical trauma. Furthermore, rather than invite a calculated comparison of the Holocaust and apartheid, *Disgrace* adroitly signals how aging and late style subtend our understanding

of both. The ‘late strategies’ employed by Levi, Roth and Bellow become, in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, a desire to live out a painful condition that cannot be washed or wished away.

While the novel has received significant critical attention since its publication in 1999, surprisingly few readers have focused on the idiom of old age that runs continuously through the novel. Since David Lurie is only fifty-two, it is perhaps not surprising that critics have looked away from the rhetoric of old age and David’s efforts to produce a last work at the end of the novel. I trace the novel’s distinctions between bodily and experiential aging. Where bodily aging supervenes on all creatures’ lives, experiential aging refers to the ways that experiences, especially those of trauma, can lead to anachronistic, obsolescent, and isolated states of mind and ways of life. At the start of the novel, David’s premature claim to be old allows him to look away from the pain he has caused others, and the history of violence with which he is affiliated as a white South African. In the aftermath of a traumatic attack on his daughter’s farm, however, David gets a taste of what it will be like to be an old man. In this state of increasing dependence, where he come to rely on the kindness of strangers, David become increasingly attuned to those forms of life – human and animal – whose lives are similarly dependent on others.

This recognition, which is mediated by numerous Holocaust references, images, and tropes, points towards David’s growing awareness of his own complicity as a late representative of empire. Unable to sustain the belief in his own innocence, David comes to see old age in a new light. He leaves a period of fixity and avoidance and enters one of increasing difficulty and adaptation for which there is no cure or solution. In response, David turns his attention from an emphasis on ‘curing’ to ‘caring’, a form of attention to

those in need that recognizes its own limits, and which doesn't seek to address the underlying cause but, instead, to reduce the present state of suffering. Through this transition, David comes to live out his status as a late representative of empire within what Coetzee depicts, at least within the atypical setting of Lucy's farm, as the "gray zone" of post-Apartheid South Africa. In this way, I argue, David becomes the ideal reader of Primo Levi's last work – a perpetrator who, in late life, comes to reckon with a past that cannot be washed or wished away.

The same constellation of themes that animate Levi at the end of his life and his last book – the refusal of personal integration, the dependence on memories of the past, the growing sense of isolation and alienation linked to late life, the recognition on one's previously unacknowledged complicity, the sense that one's perspective belongs to the past, and the appropriation of one's legacy by future generations – gives shape to a more general condition of agedness and lateness that informs the post-Holocaust *Vollendungsromane* I consider. With this in mind, I want to turn to Levi's last work, *The Drowned and the Saved*, and to his unique strategy for the preservation of Holocaust memory.

CHAPTER ONE

Primo Levi and the Problem of Age

Who knows what growing old means, especially for a man still wounded by the Lager experience and by his memories?

-Massimo Guiliani¹

So even though I know I have important things to say and I have no hesitation or doubt over the value of my books, I nevertheless have the sense that they are old, that they've aged.

-Primo Levi²

This chapter considers how Primo Levi, at the end of his life and in his last work, approached the fading of the Holocaust from memory — the personal memories of survivors — in terms that sought to preempt and arrest its fading from history. For Levi, whose life had been committed to the act of bearing witness, aging and the passage of time were felt with special intensity. In interviews during the 1980s, he repeatedly entwined his personal experience of growing old with the “fatal slide” of Holocaust memory: “I feel the passage of the years, of my years too,” he said in a 1986 interview with Giorgio Colcagno: “And as they pass, I can feel the slippage in the way these memories are understood in the world” (VOM 110). For Levi, the effort to arrest this “slippage,” became the central challenge of his last work, *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986).³ How he understood this challenge, and, in particular, the role that the gray zone plays in the process, is the subject of this chapter.

¹ Giuliani, Massimo. *A Centaur in Auschwitz: Reflections on Primo Levi's Thinking* (New York: Lexington Books, 2003), 75.

² Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon, eds. *The Voice of Memory: Interviews 1961-1987: Primo Levi*. Trans. Gordon. (New York: The New Press, 2001), 230.

³ Hereafter abbreviated DS and cited parenthetically in the text.

Some critics, reading Levi's suicide backwards into his last work, treat his last book as little more than a reflection of the author's life. Others turn to the concept of the gray zone, finding in its circulation of innocence and guilt a metaphor for contemporary life, and emphasizing the gray zone's implications for conceptions of history, subjectivity, and ethics.⁴ My reading, which sees the theory and the biography as intimately linked, focuses on how Levi's anxieties regarding the aging process, and the impact of time on memory, drive what I describe as his last work's pedagogical mission, or "late strategy." Levi, I argue, is not only *representing* but also *responding* to the problem of age and the fading of Holocaust memory in the chapter on the gray zone. Levi turns to this zone of ambiguity and complicity, I argue, in order to disabuse his readers of simplistic accounts of the Holocaust as a narrative about Nazi monsters and innocent victims — a move, I argue, that aims to sustain his readers' *active* and *moral relationship* to the events of the Holocaust, even as the generation who survived them age and die, taking their testimony with them. In this way, Levi attempts to reconcile the historical passing of generations to the enduring moral crisis that the Holocaust presents to us all.

⁴ See Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002). Agamben recasts the gray zone as a traumatic state of complicity experienced by all secondary witnesses. For Agamben, the gray zone of violence and ambiguity becomes the hidden yet constant paradigm for modern civilian life. Debarti Sanyal, in addition to critiquing Agamben's transformation of a singular historical event into "an ever encroaching web of complicity," provides a strong account of the ways that theorists, and especially trauma theorists, find in Levi's gray zone an "overarching framework for thinking about history, subjectivity and ethics" (3). However, I am not primarily interested in critiquing the ethical consequences associated with these critical discourses, and the forms of identification that they encourage. Others have already done that work. See Debarti Sanyal's "A Soccer Match in Auschwitz: Passing Culpability in Holocaust Criticism," *Representations* 79 (2002); "Amy Hungerford's 'Memorizing Memory,'" *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (2000); Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001); and Ruth Leys critique of Cathy Caruth in *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), 266-97. In this chapter, I don't consider how the gray zone has been appropriated and deployed by trauma theorists, but rather, the gray zone's pedagogical function in Levi's last work. To build my case, I concentrate on the specific path Levi follows over the course of the gray zone chapter.

In 1964, just a year after publishing his second work, *La Tregua* (published in Britain as *The Truce* and in the United States as *The Reawakening*) Primo Levi wrote the poem, *Approdo* (“Landing”). The poem depicts a man in a state of psychological retirement who has achieved a measure of happiness by leaving behind him the “seas and storms” of life. Yet the similes Levi uses to describe his state – “Happy the man like an extinguished flame, / Happy the man like estuary sand” – liken his happiness with a form of death (“extinguished flame”). The poem ends with a powerful image of a hollowed out subjectivity. The man, Levi tells us, “fears nothing, hopes for nothing, expects nothing, / But stares fixedly at the setting sun” (Felman 25).⁵ For many readers familiar with Levi’s biography, however, this image of an empty and indifferent speaking subject presents a stark contrast to the survivor himself, a man known for his longstanding commitment to the act of bearing witness and the preservation of memory.⁶

Responding to this apparent contrast, the Italian critic, Massimo Giuliani, asks readers of the poem to abandon their desire to understand what growing old might mean for Levi as a man wounded by his Lager experience and by his memories of those days. Giuliani, attuned to the contrast between Levi’s image as an engaged humanist and the

⁵ In Cynthia Ozick’s post-Holocaust *Vollendungsroman*, *The Shawl* (1989), the much-maligned figure of Dr. Tree aligns this state of emptiness and indifference with a form of Buddhist “wisdom.”

⁶ In *The Reawakening*, which chronicles the year-and-a-half Levi spent returning to Turin after the war, he describes a similar state of premature agedness. On the road, Levi describes his experiences in Auschwitz to a Polish lawyer. The lawyer, who translates Levi’s testimony for a small group of on-lookers, replaces the word ‘Jew’ with ‘political.’ When Levi him, he responds in French: “C’est mieux pour vous. La guerre n’est pas finie” (55). The lawyer’s words leave Levi feeling old and deflated: “I felt my sense of freedom, my sense of being a man among men, of being alive, like a warm tide ebb from me. I found myself suddenly old, lifeless, tired beyond all human measure; the war was not over, there was always war” (55). The image of the apathetic and indifferent old man plays an important role in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, the subject of the fourth chapter.

poetic subject's radical indifference, asks that we forego the desire to read the poem as an exposition of the author's life.⁷ Levi sudden and violent death in 1987, however, led to a flood of explanations.⁸ Where Levi read the obscurity of Celan's poetry as a kind of pre-suicide, his own restraint, equanimity, and moral poise, made it more difficult to reconcile his work with the manner of his death.⁹ As Alfred Kazin says: "it is almost impossible to think of Levi as a pre-suicide, a not wanting-to-be, a flight from the world" (125). For a writer who, as Tony Judt once said, "wrote in a different key from the rest," Levi seemed like the survivor least likely to take his own life (56).

In an effort to reconcile his image with the manner of his death, critics, friends and family members provided various explanations. Elie Wiesel, often regarded as Levi's emotional opposite, backdated Levi's suicide to Auschwitz, while Lawrence Langer, the noted Holocaust scholar, wondered if the "death that he [Levi] eluded at Auschwitz did

⁷ A number of contemporary critics have challenged the international critical consensus that Levi remained a humanist after the war. See Jonathan Druker's *Primo Levi and Humanism after Auschwitz* (New York: Palgrave, 2009). Druker argues that even as Levi "defends a particular pre-Holocaust idea of the human, his texts involuntarily chart its demise" (2). And this ending points, he goes on to say, "toward a new beginning, perhaps toward a post-Enlightenment not in the thrall to instrumental reason, or a post humanism not founded on the nobility of Man but on an ethical obligation to the other man" (2). Bryan Cheyette, by contrast, argues that Levi's work, from the beginning, expresses the tension between 'life' and 'death', humanism and post humanism:

Levi kept faith with the values of western humanism – literature, law, science and reason – which provided an essential point of continuity between his time before and after the camps. At the same time, he recognized the extent to which Auschwitz-Birkenau completely corrupted these received values and made them suspect. His writing is a restless negotiation between these two points whereas those who appropriate him tend to stress merely one aspect of this multiple perspective. ("Appropriating" 71)

Cheyette is primarily interested in the ways that Levi's ethical uncertainty and studied ambiguities have been appropriated and reduced by subsequent readers.

⁸ While authorities quickly proclaimed Levi's death a suicide, a number of subsequent commentators and close friends, attuned to the ambiguities surrounding the manner and time of his death, have challenged the claim that Levi killed himself. See Diego Gambetta's "Primo Levi's Last Moments," *Boston Review* 24.3 (summer): 25-29.

⁹ Levi, who so valued clarity and direct communication with the reader, linked Celan's poetry – and modernist obscurity more generally – with his suicide: "It is not by chance that the least two decipherable poets writing in German, Georg Trakl and Paul Celan, both died as suicides... Their common destiny makes one think about the obscurity of their poetry as a pre-suicide, a not wanting to be, a flight from the world, of which the intentional death was the crown" (qtd. in Kazin 125). See Levi's essay "On Obscure Writing," in *Other People's Trades*. Trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1989).

not finally defeat him” (Langer “Legacy” 215). Leon Wieseltier suggested that his suicide called his earlier works and pure image into question: “When he smashed his body,” Wieseltier claims, “he smashed his bet” that a survivor could ever recover (qtd. in Gambetta 26). While some invoked Levi’s family history of depression and suicide, others ascribed his death to the end of his career as a writer.¹⁰ Renzo, Levi’s son, explained his father’s death along these lines: “Now everyone wants to understand, to grasp, to probe,” says Renzo with regards to his father’s sudden death: “I think my father had already written the last act of his existence” (qtd. in Gambetta 26). For Renzo, Levi, after writing his last work, had no reason to remain alive. The novelist, Oreste Del Buono, reads Levi’s suicide as only a response to the aging process: “The loss of resilience in muscles and bones,” says Del Buono, “coupled with the fear of memory-loss, was bleakly undermining for Primo. Let’s call it an organic caving-in, *un cedimento organico*. In the end Primo had no strength left to resist his body’s cruel chemistry” (qtd. in Thompson 504).

Despite the efforts of critics like Guiliani, Jonathan Druker and Alexander Stille to offset the tendency to read suicide backwards into his earlier works, others repeatedly scoured Levi’s last work, *The Drowned and the Saved*, in search of clues that would shed light on his final act.¹¹ In the process, a biographical narrative emerged that pits the

¹⁰ All of Levi’s biographers discuss his depression and the circumstances surrounding his death at some length. See Carol Angier, *The Double Bond, Primo Levi: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002); Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002); and Myriam Anissimov, *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist* (London: Aurum Press, 1998).

¹¹ In “On the Dangers of Reading Suicide into the Works of Primo Levi,” Druker argues that “the irresolvable doubts about Levi’s death make it prudent and even necessary that we reject any and all attempts to fix a definite meaning to such ambiguous circumstances that, after so many years, are unlikely to become clearer” (223). Instead, he goes on to say, “we should engage with Levi’s books, which are his most important legacy” (223). See also Alexander Stille’s “The Biographical Fallacy,” in *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, ed. Stan Pugliese (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 209-221; Alfred Kazin, “My Debt to Elie

young, energized author of *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947) and *The Reawakening* (1963), against the older, more pessimistic and angry author, who, in his mid-sixties, sat down to write what would become his last work. This sharp distinction helped critics explain how the author who, as David Denby once said, never suffered “the losses to sensibility that many writers about Auschwitz considered almost inevitable,” could throw himself from his fourth floor landing (27).

Take Cynthia Ozick’s article, “The Suicide Note,” as an example. The article, which was published in *The New Republic* in 1988, identifies the emergence of Levi’s long repressed anger as the central feature of his final work. Her article sets out to shatter Levi’s image as a survivor “consummately free of rage, resentment, violent feeling, or any overt drive to ‘trade punches,’” a survivor whose work has incorrectly been associated with feelings of “peacefulness” and “uplift” (33). For Ozick, the last work can be read as a suicide note *avant la lettre* – a work that prefigures the transformation of Levi’s rage into ultimate self-destruction. Viewed from the perspective of his last work, she attributes his earlier works to a form of self-deception. Levi, she claims, spent his career acting the way he believed a “civilized man ought to conduct himself when he is documenting savagery” (36). The result, she goes on to say, “was the world’s consensus: a man somehow set apart from retaliatory passion. A man who would not trade punches. A transparency; a pure spirit. A vessel of clear water” (36). While Ozick, by caricaturing Levi in these terms, may reduce “him to a Christian stereotype,” she seeks to uncover the years he spent playing the part of a civilized survivor (Cheyette “Ethical Uncertainty” 269). *The Drowned and the Saved*, says Ozick, “is the record of man returning blows

Wiesel and Primo Levi, in *Testimony: Contemporary Writers Make the Holocaust Personal* (New York: Random House, 1989), 115-128.

with all the might of human fury, in full knowledge that the pen is mightier than the fist” (34). Where Levi describes himself as an anachronistic remainder in his last work, a survivor who felt too old to change, Ozick imagines Levi as a man in the midst of the most violent transformation of his life, one that finally allowed him to remove his earlier “civilized” mask. In the process, she locates Levi among a cohort of survivors animated by a similar sense of rage and resentment: Elie Wiesel, Jean Améry, Ruth Kluger, and perhaps most provocatively, Ozick’s fictional survivor, Rosa Lublin from her *Vollendungsroman*, *The Shawl*. Levi, in the end, had lost his sensibility.¹²

In a short article that reflects on Levi’s troubled relation to Kafka, John Leonard similarly identifies the emergence of rage as a key feature of the last work. However, Leonard, like Lawrence Langer, believes that it was Levi’s late life reflections on ambiguity and collaboration that led to the anger that traverse his last work: “It tore him apart,” says Leonard, “to consider the pathos, ambiguities and collaborations of the ‘gray zone’ in the camps, the ‘filtered memories’ of victims and the survival strategies of even the bravest... This calm man was suddenly furious” (Leonard 30). Leonard, unlike Ozick, is far more attuned to Levi’s late life reflections on the tight compact between survival and complicity. In an often-quoted passage from *The Drowned and the Saved*, from which Leonard quotes, Levi sheds light on his status as a compromised witness. After declaring that the “worst survived,” Levi goes on to make the following confession: “I must repeat,” he says, that

¹² Ozick, who believes that anger and outrage is the best defense against the fading of Holocaust memory, recasts Levi as Jean Améry’s double, despite Levi’s active effort to distinguish himself from Améry in *The Drowned and the Saved*.

we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion of which I have become conscious little by little, reading the memoirs of others and reading mine at a distance of years...we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those that did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the “Muslims,” the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have had a general significance. (83)¹³

Levi, who only recognized this dilemma at a distance of years, came to realize that he would not be able to assimilate the inassimilable experiences of the “complete witnesses.” Further, this distance between himself and the “drowned” reminded him that he would not be able to die, as it were, a good death. While Leonard contends that these late life recognitions “tore him apart,” Ozick almost completely ignores them and the role that the gray zone plays in Levi’s last work. Instead, she chooses to focus on the anger that Levi directs outwards. Instead of contending with his reflections on the gray zone, Ozick instead claims that: “Levi is careful not to blur victim and victimizer” (33).

Another way of reading Levi’s last work against the background of his earlier productions focuses on a theme of self-revision. Where Ozick sees the emergence of

¹³ The passage goes on to say that all those who survived did so by virtue of some form of privilege. Levi explains:

Under another sky, and returned from a similar diverse slavery, Solzhenitsyn also noted: “Almost all those who served a long sentence and whom you congratulate because they are survivors are unquestionably *pridurki* or were such during the greater part of their imprisonment” [...] In the language of that other concentrationary universe, the *pridurki* are the prisoners who, in one way or another, won a position of privilege, those we called the Prominent. (83-84).

In this way, says Jonathan Druker, Levi “ironically inverted the typical moral terminology: “the drowned” (i.e. the damned) in Auschwitz are innocent and ‘the saved’ (i.e. the survivors) are sinners. No matter what moral shortcomings they possessed, the ‘non-men’ are absolved because they are complete victims, where the survivors of this Darwinian world inevitably appear morally corrupt when judged by the standards of everyday life” (22).

anger, the American Holocaust scholar, Alvin Rosenfeld, identifies a contrite, self-critical Levi — a survivor, says Rosenfeld, who “is hard on himself in this book, indeed, much too hard” (“End” 192). In *The End of the Holocaust*, a work that reflects on the fading of the Holocaust from history, Rosenfeld considers the shift from early to late Levi in terms of Levi’s changing relationship to his own work as a writer and witness.¹⁴ From the vantage point of late life, Levi comes to see that his own work contributed to the “drift and distortion of memory and consequently...the obfuscation and falsification of the past.” This painful realization, says Rosenfeld, led him to call “into serious question the value of the testimony offered in his earlier books” (207). This leads Rosenfeld to read Levi’s last work as the “the author’s farewell to writing” – an account similar to the one provided by Renzo, Levi’s son (209). And where Ozick ignores the gray zone, Rosenfeld aligns Levi’s interest in the “theme of moral ambiguity,” which “he develops with such forcefulness and precision in ‘The Gray Zone,’” with his late life recognition regarding the tight compact between survival and complicity (205). In this way, says Rosenfeld, he “introduces into his last writings a note of self-indictment and, with it, a burden of shame that must have been excruciating for him to bear” (205).

Rosenfeld was not wrong to focus on Levi’s changing relation to writing. With the passage of time Levi came to see his own work, and the use value of the testimonial

¹⁴ When Rosenfeld speaks of the “end” of the Holocaust he does not mean the end of historical scholarship about the Holocaust, nor does he imply the end of attempts to represent or memorialize the Holocaust in literature or film. Instead, Rosenfeld considers the ways that the mass murder of millions of innocent people was being “trivialized and vulgarized...lightened of its historical burden and...the sense of scandal that necessarily should attend it” (11). This trivialization, he argues, is not the result of people forgetting the Holocaust, but the effect, as it were, of too much speech: “The very success of the Holocaust’s wide dissemination in the public sphere,” Rosenfeld says, “can work to undermine its gravity and render it a familiar thing” (11). Rosenfeld concentrates primarily on a group of Holocaust survivors and writers who have all, in different ways, sought to arrest what Primo Levi famously describes as the fatal slide of the Holocaust towards simplification and stereotype – a slide, as Levi came to see late in life, that threatened to render the Holocaust unrecognizable.

project, in a very different light. Writing offered the young Levi a medium through which to achieve a form of fictional order, and a sense of coherence that had been so shaken during his time in Auschwitz. In a beautiful passage from *The Periodic Table*, Levi describes writing as form of resurrection:

The things I had seen and suffered were burning inside of me; I felt closer to the dead than the living, and I felt guilty at being a man, because men had built Auschwitz, and Auschwitz had gulped down millions of human beings, and many of my friends, and a woman who was dear to my heart. It seemed to me that I would be purified if I told its story...By writing I found peace for a while and felt myself become a man again, a person like everyone else, neither a martyr nor a debased saint: one of those people who form a family and look to the future rather than the past. (157)

Through writing, Levi, a survivor who felt closer to the dead than the living, found a means by which to return to the world of the living. Writing gave Levi a venue through which he managed to become a man again, to escape the restrictive labels of martyr or debased saint. Moreover, it allowed him to start a family and to reorient himself from the traumatic past towards the promise of a better future.

But even as Levi recounts the benefits of writing, an important current of doubt runs through the passage. Levi doesn't say that he was "purified" through the act of writing, but rather, that he "imagined he might be." And he doesn't claim that writing allowed him to "find peace," but that it allowed him to "find peace for a while." By the 1980s, the salvific potential was replaced with a set of concerns about the use value of his earlier works and the testimonial project more generally. And his last work, which returns

to the themes of his first work, actively reflects on the costs of his own, earlier testimonies.

In an afterword to *The Reawakening*, Levi describes his earlier books as “artifacts” that mediate between past and present: “Now many years have passed,” says Levi, “the two books, above all the first, have had many adventures, and have interposed themselves, in a curious way, like an artificial memory, but also like a defensive barrier, between my very normal present and the dramatic past” (230). Reviewing his earlier works from the vantage point of late life, Levi comes to see them as artificial memories that have displaced and replaced the events they describe. As a result, Rosenfeld reads Levi’s last work as an analysis of the “causes” and “implications” of his inability to communicate the fundamental experiences of his life.

Rosenfeld, Leonard and Ozick imagine different versions of the same man, but what they share is a style of reading that concentrates more on what the last work *says* about the life of the aging survivor than on what the last work actually *does* – how it *reveals* and *responds* to the fading of the Holocaust from memory. Put differently, we might say that these critics read the last work as an extended meditation on the implications of lateness. Following Edward Said’s understanding of lateness, they describe Levi as an aging artist who refused to go quietly into the night, one who expressed outrage at losses that could not be reversed and a future that could not be evaded. In this sense, Levi came to embody what Said describes as a “nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness”

(“On Late Style” 7).¹⁵ But these concerns, while salient, tend to ignore Levi’s on-going commitment to communication, a legacy that connects his first work to his last work.

Indeed, Levi last work reflects repeatedly – almost obsessively – on the risks and rewards of inter-generational communication. He describes his primary desire to communicate with “young people of the 1980s,” the same young people who associate the Holocaust with their grandfathers’ generation, and for whom the events of the Holocaust were becoming increasingly “distant, blurred, [and] ‘historical’” (198). And he was highly attuned to the specific differences between himself, and the codes that had shaped his life, and those relied on by members of the young generation. In his mind, they were “bereft not of ideals but of certainties, indeed distrustful of the grand revealed truth: disposed to accept the small truths, changeable from month to month on the convulsed wave of cultural fashions, whether guided or wild” (DS 199). Levi, long regarded as an anachronistic figure, a 19th-century humanist likened to “some heroically oblivious silent-film actor who maintains his calm amid the whirling’s of nature,” was now facing a generation who relegated such figures, and the events that defined their lives, to the mythical past (Denby 28). Regardless, Levi remained committed to the effort to communicate with the young: “For us to speak with the young becomes ever more difficult,” he says in his last work. “We see it as a duty and, at the same time, as a risk: the risk of appearing anachronistic, of not being listened to” (DS 199). While he was certainly aware that the *desire* to communicate and the *ability* to communicate were two separate things, Levi realized that he could no longer rely on the basic narrative urge that drove his first book, *Survival in Auschwitz*. In the preface of that work, Levi claims that

¹⁵ While Said does not discuss Levi explicitly, his description of Adorno as a holdover from an earlier age resonates with Levi’s description of himself in his last work.

he did not intend to “formulate new accusations,” but, instead, “to furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind” (“Survival” 9).¹⁶ Fueled by what he describes as a twenty-six year-old writer as a feverish compulsion to tell his story to the “rest” of the world, and to make the “rest participate in it,” Levi employed a set of literary tactics to encourage an immersive experience for the reader (SIA 9). Now, forty years later, and powerfully attuned to the impact of time on the memory of trauma, he would have to rely on a more strategic approach. But before considering Levi’s late strategy, I want to briefly consider the ways that aging, and the impact of time on memory, shaped Levi’s last years.

II

By the 1980s, Levi had crossed a shadow line into the third age. Now in his sixties, despite feeling in possession of all his faculties, Levi expressed anxiety about the transformation associated with age. In a short article published in 1982 in *La Stampa*, Levi described the onset of old age in terms of an impending metamorphosis that would render him unrecognizable:

Me, old? Absolutely yes: my date of birth, my long-sightedness, my grey hair, my adult children all go to show it. Last week, for the first time ever, someone gave up their seat for me on the tram, and it left me feeling very strange.

¹⁶ Hereafter abbreviated SIA and cited parenthetically in the text.

In myself, as a rule, I don't feel old. I haven't lost my curiosity for the world around me, nor my interest in other people, nor my competitive instinct nor my taste for playing games and solving problems.

I still like interacting with nature, I take joy in encountering it through all five senses, studying it, describing it in speech or writing.

All my organs, my limbs, my memory and my imagination are still in working order, and yet I am all too well aware of that grave ring of that terrible word I have just written down twice: 'still.' (qtd. in VOM 76)

While he "still" felt himself to be in command of all his faculties, the passage anticipates a period when the memories and capacities that defined his life as a survivor and writer would no longer be fully operational. In "Brute Force" a short article published in 1983, Levi describes the aging process in terms of the "old human battle against matter" ("Black Hole" 137). Here, too, he describes the aging process as a period of transformation, and one that is not always for the better: "In general, over the long term, homeostasis does not hold, and 'life' sees to it that you become another person: cowardly, non-responsive, mean, corrupt, a hypochondriac, because it nibbles away at your defenses until it destroys them" ("Black Hole" 137). For the aging survivor for whom memory was a moral obligation, and who feared the arrival of mental and physical changes that would be impossible to reverse, the prospect and onset of old age was felt with special intensity.

Indeed, for readers familiar with Levi's biography it would be almost impossible to separate Levi's concerns about memory loss from his vocation as a professional writer and witness. In a number of interviews during the 1980s, Levi spoke of the need to

actively preserve the strength of one's memory in order to ensure that they did not "go to ruin":

Now I am sixty-two years old and at sixty-two your memory deteriorates quite noticeably, just as you lose the strength in your muscles and eyesight. The third age begins with memory. It could be that in my most recent writings this fact comes through, this concern not to let one's own memories fade, not to lose the ability to store away new memories. (VOM 145)

Growing old meant the end of the vocation that had come to define and justify his survival.

Henry Kyrstal, a psychoanalyst who worked with aging survivors, provides a helpful account of the difficulties they faced in later years. The integrative work of the life review, according to Kyrstal, requires that the aging individual "acquiesce to the 'accidental coincidence of but one life cycle with but one segment of history.'" This means that he or she, in the process of looking back on life, must come to accept that "one's own life cycle and...the people who have become significant to it as something that *had to be*, and that, by necessity, it accepted no substitutions" (83). Moreover, the effort to integrate the past requires the aging survivor to re-encounter "the helplessness and the *shame* of the past." For the survivor, however, this would mean accepting as inevitable the alignment of his or her life with the Holocaust. As a result, aging survivors come to see the integrative work of the life review as a form of betrayal, in essence a way of granting Hitler a posthumous victory. "To them," Krystal says, "self-integration appears antithetical to the only justification of their survival – that they are obliged to be

angry witnesses against the outrage of the Holocaust” (83). The sense of fidelity towards the past overrides the personal desire for integration, and the aging survivor, unwilling to assimilate events of the Holocaust, remains an angry witness. Aging, then, for the survivors was not experienced only as a personal problem – it was a process with collective implication for the future of Holocaust memory.

Levi’s home life during these years only increased his fears. With a domestic atmosphere that Myriam Anissimov, one of Levi’s biographers, describes as “both protective and repressive,” Levi was in charge of his ninety-one-year-old mother who had been paralyzed by a stroke (391). In addition to her full time care, Levi and his wife were helping to look after his ninety-five-year-old mother-in-law who lived close by. While Philip Roth, following a brief visit to Turin, describes Levi as the “most devoted Jewish son you ever met,” Anissimov describes him as a “prisoner” within his apartment (qtd. in Pierpont-Roth 164).¹⁷ And the aging survivor was particularly susceptible to his mother’s transformation.

In a phone call with the chief Rabbi of Rome shortly before Levi’s death, which the Rabbi did not report until ten years later, Levi apparently gave voice to this painful association between his own past and his mother’s decline: “I don’t know how to go on. I can’t stand this life any longer. My mother has cancer and each time I look at her face I remember the faces of the men lying dead on the planks of the bunks of Auschwitz” (qtd. in Thomson 499). The demolition of man, a central theme in Levi’s work, was now being restaged through his mother’s inevitable and irreversible decline – a haunting premonition of what was to come, and one that casts a long shadow over Levi’s last

¹⁷ See Roth’s 1986 interview with Levi, which has been republished in Philip, Roth, *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 1-18.

work.¹⁸ Additionally, Levi watched as his old friend, Ada Della Torre, was transformed by the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease (Thomson 489). As Ida transformed before his eyes, he was apparently reading Jean Améry's *On Aging: Revolt and Resignation* (1970), a work that would have done little to lift his mood.

Améry, who has long been regarded as Levi's philosophical and emotional opposite, wrote extensively on late life and the impact of aging on the survivor.¹⁹ While the two disagree on certain key issues, Levi, in his last years, appears to have been powerfully influenced by Améry's reflections on late life, and perhaps also by his comparisons of the challenges of old age with his experiences as an inmate during the war. Moreover, Levi, like Améry, comes to reflect, especially in his last work, on the impact of time on the memory – a key theme of Améry's earlier collection of essays, *At the Mind's Limits*.²⁰

¹⁸ Survivors routinely compare the challenges of old age with their traumatic experiences during the war. In *Days and Memory*, Charlotte Delbo's last work, she describes the aging process as one that threatens to return her to the traumatic past. The work begins with the following concern:

Auschwitz is there, unalterable, precise, but enveloped in the skin of memory, an impermeable skin that isolates it from my present self. Unlike the snake's skin, the skin of memory does not renew itself. Oh, it may harden further... Alas, I often fear lest it grow thin, crack, and the camp get hold of me again. Thinking about it makes me tremble with apprehension. They claim the dying see their whole life pass before their eyes. (2)

Her last work, written forty years after her first, chronicles the last moments before the "skin of memory" finally cracks. Levi expresses a similar fear at the end of *The Reawakening*.

¹⁹ In addition to reading Améry's work *On Aging*, Levi also apparently kept by side a copy of Améry's *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death* (1976).

²⁰ In *On Aging: Revolt and Resignation*, Améry's full length study on the representations and meaning of old age in a series of literary and philosophical works, he claims that the horror and anguish of old age, which he describes as "the most evil of all intimacies," was worse than anything he experienced as a prisoner during the war. While he could weather attacks from "an enemy world," the process of decaying "from within" presented a unique, and insurmountable set of challenges ("On Aging" 116). When looking back on his war years, Améry attributes his survival to the fact of his youth: "I was not afraid. I was not brave, because there was a lot that terrified me. I was young. And the death that threatened me came from the outside: there is no nicer death than being killed by an enemy" ("Aging" 116). More than fifteen years later, in February of 1986, Levi, who was reading Améry's book *On Aging* at the time, also compared his experiences in Auschwitz with the challenges associated with age. In a letter to his translator and confidante, Ruth Felman, he said that he was going through his "worst time since Auschwitz": "in certain respects," he went on to say, "it's *even worse* than Auschwitz, because I'm no longer young and I have scant resilience. My wife is exhausted. I beg you to forgive this outburst, I know you'll understand... *de profundis*" (qtd. in Thompson 491).

At the Minds Limits was a collection of five interlocking testimonial essays that offer a first-person account of the Holocaust and its traumatic legacy from the perspective of a thoroughly assimilated Austrian Jew. In it, Améry expresses his concern at how the Holocaust was being compared to a wound that could heal with the passage of time. Améry actively resisted this tendency that set the biological process of wound healing in the place of the far more difficult and uncomfortable moral work of reconciliation. Améry conceived his efforts as a direct response to the ways that the Holocaust was being assimilated and “clarified” with the passage of time:

However – and in this I must still persist – enlightenment is not the same as clarification. I had no clarity when I was writing this little book, I do not have it today, and I hope that I never will. Clarification would also amount to disposal, settlement of the case, which can then be placed in the files of history. My book is meant to aid in preventing precisely this. For nothing is resolved, no conflict is settled, no remembering has become a mere memory...Nothing has healed. (“Mind’s Limits” xi)

The aging survivor, for whom there was no escape from the pain associated with the past, stood in opposition to this process of clarification. With the onset of old age, the survivor came to realize that his or her memories were not a “scar” that would heal “over with the ticking of time,” but rather, that he or she was suffering from an “insidious disease that is growing worse with the years” (“Mind’s Limits” 57). In this way, Améry saw the survivor’s resentment as an important roadblock to the forms of healing associated with the passage of time. Remarkably, and contrary to received wisdom, the victim’s refusal to forgive perpetrators has a greater potential for stopping cycles of violence than does his

forgiveness. Améry believed that keeping this trauma active and vital within the collective memory of the German people is a task that will depend on “continuing resentment ... in one camp and, aroused by that, self mistrust in the other” (“Mind’s Limits” 78). Only by keeping the anger vital can “history become moral” (“Mind’s Limits” 78). In this way, according to Améry, the victims’ outrage plays an important role in the work of moral reconciliation, a sentiment that looks back to Ozick’s reading of Levi’s last work.²¹

Levi reflects on the same problems that concern Améry, but he ends up providing a very different answer. Where Améry focuses on the ethical importance of outrage, and on moral work indifferent to the passage of time, Levi enacts what I describe as a “late strategy” to deal with the impact of the passage of time on memory, one that stresses the awareness of one’s potential for complicity. With that in mind, I want to turn to Levi’s last work.

III

The Drowned and the Saved dwells almost obsessively on the passage of time, with recurring phrases like “at a distance of years,” “the passing of years,” and “with the passage of time.” Indeed, the Preface and the first chapter can be read as an extended meditation on the historically negative work of time’s passing. And if time can, in this

²¹ Améry also feared that the aging survivor would be seen as an impediment to the healing process. He explains: “We, the victims, will appear as the truly incorrigible, irreconcilable ones, as the antihistorical reactionaries in the exact sense of the word, and in the end it will seem like a technical mishap that some of us still survived” (“Mind’s Limits” 80).

sense, be read as the protagonist of the last work, then its impact on memory is the central theme. The Preface opens with the prophecy, ascribed to the Nazis, that the events of the Holocaust will be too enormous to be believed, and that, in a world without witnesses, the perpetrators will dictate the history of the Lagers; this prospect is connected to Levi's uncertainty regarding his own testimonial project.

Levi recasts his fears about being rendered unrecognizable, and of betraying his life long commitments – fears associated with the aging process – with the ways that Holocaust memory was changing over time. Consider the opening lines of the first chapter: “Human memory is a marvelous but fallacious instrument... The memories that lie within us are not carved in stone; not only do they tend to become erased as the years go by, but often they change, or even grow, by incorporating extraneous features” (DS 23). Levi doesn't begin the chapter with a sustained reflection on the ‘memory of the offense,’ which happens to be the chapter's title, but rather, with the fundamentally unstable nature of memory itself. The inevitable decline of memory takes center stage:

Nevertheless, even under normal conditions a slow degradation is at work, an obfuscation of outlines, a so to speak psychological oblivion, which few memories resist. Doubtless one may discern here one of the great powers of nature, the same that degrades order into disorder, youth into old age, and extinguishes life in death. Certainly practice (in this case frequent re-evocation) keeps memories fresh and alive in the same manner in which a muscle often used remains efficient, but it is also true that a memory evoked too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to become fixed in a stereotype, in a form tested by experience, crystallized,

perfected, adorned, installing itself in the place of raw memory and growing at its expense. (DS 24)

The passage sheds light on equally unappealing options: one can either accept defeat in the battle against matter, or one can choose to actively struggle to preserve memory against decay. The problem with the latter option, however, is that the very effort to preserve memory through repetition leads to the transformation of “raw memory” into a stereotypical narrative that presents a perfected version of the original events. In this way, what ends up getting preserved bears no resemblance to the original – a painful prospect for a man committed to the preservation of the past.

While Levi is quick to point out that the oppressors and the victims are by no means “interchangeable,” he is powerfully attuned to the fact that their memories are all affected by the passage of time. Both, Levi says, “are in the same trap” (DS 24). And they both seek to replace their “genuine memories,” which are painful for different reasons, with a more “convenient reality,” one that allows them to achieve a measure of detachment and distance from the past (DS 27). “The further events fade into the past,” says Levi, “the more the construction of convenient truth grows and is perfected” (DS 27). Unable to arrest this process, Levi ends the chapter with an apology. “An apology is in order,” Levi announces: “This very book is drenched in memory; what’s more a distant memory. Thus it draws from a suspect source and must be protected against itself” (DS 34).

But the impact of time on individual memory was hardly the only problem Levi identified. He was also consumed with the disconnection between his own desire to bear witness to the events, and the ways that young people were interpreting those events. In a

remarkable anecdote from his last work, Levi dramatizes this disconnection through a scene of failed pedagogy that takes place during one of his many classroom visits:

I remember with a smile the adventure I had several years ago in a fifth-grade classroom, where I had been invited to comment on my book and to answer the pupils' questions. An alert-looking little boy, apparently at the head of the class, asked me the obligatory question: "But how come you didn't escape?" I briefly explained to him what I have written here. Not quite convinced, he asked me to draw a sketch of the camp on the blackboard indicating the location of the watch towers, the gates, the barbed wire, and the power station...my interlocutor studied the drawing for a few instants, asked me for a few further clarifications, then he presented to me the plan that he had worked out: here, at night, cut the throat of the sentinel; then, put on his clothes; immediately after this, run over there to the power station and cut off the electricity, so the search lights would go out and the high tension fence would be deactivated; after that I could leave without any trouble. He added seriously: "If it should happen to you again, do as I told you. You'll see that you'll be able to do it. (157)

The scene illuminates the young student's inability to understand the significance of Levi's testimony. Where Levi describes a world in which imprisonment does not lead to escape, the student imagines a world in which a Hollywood escape is always a possibility. The imagination of atrocity, and Levi certainly saw this, had been influenced

by Hollywood escape narratives.²² The student assimilates the past such that an “escape from Treblinka” is indistinguishable from an escape “from an ordinary jail,” and hunger in Auschwitz can be compared to the experience of “someone who has skipped a meal” (DS 158). But Levi’s aim here is not to fault the student. Instead, he uses the episode to shed light on the gap that “exists and grows wider every year between things as they were ‘down there’ and things as they are represented by the current imagination fed by approximative books, films and myths” (DS 157). The scene illustrates the fatal slide of Holocaust memory “towards simplification and stereotype” – a slide that Levi’s last work seeks to arrest (DS 157).

It is important to note that Levi places the scene under the sign of teaching, a move that connects it to another scene of teaching from Levi’s first work, *Survival in Auschwitz*. In “The Canto of Ulysses” chapter from the first work, Levi refers to the twenty-sixth canto of Dante’s poem, and his efforts to recall and transmit a specific passage on the uniquely human quest for knowledge and excellence, during an Italian lesson with Pikkolo, a young Alsatian inmate. The young Levi begins his Italian lesson by attempting to recall lines from Dante’s poem that he once knew by heart. The struggle to remember the lines, and to create a point of contact between Dante’s world and the world of Lagers, speaks to a larger effort to impose a measure of control and order on the chaotic universe of the Lager. Teaching Pikkolo, then, was not merely a matter of transferring information, but an effort to transmit a universal message.

Victor Brombert, in an important reading of this scene from *Survival in Auschwitz*, reminds us that Levi, through his deployment of Dante, establishes a link

²² The formal steps of the plan outlined by the student – cutting the guard’s throat, putting on his clothes, cutting off the electricity, etc. – follows a recognizable plot pattern indebted to Hollywood escape narratives.

between two scenes of teaching: one taking place between Levi and Pikkolo, and the other involving the effort of Dante's Ulysses to teach his men, a link, Brombert goes on to say, that is "not merely thematic, but historic and transcultural: from Homer to Virgil, to Dante, to Primo Levi, to the future reader. The spanning of the Greek and Roman antiquity, the Middle Ages, the modern period, suggests a reassuring permanence and continuity" ("Antiheroes" 117).²³ The scene of teaching from Levi's first work establishes a form of trans-historical continuity that allows Levi to "reestablish a link with the past," and to save "it from oblivion," a process, he says, that helped to reinforce his identity (DS 139). The scene of teaching from his last work, by contrast, presents an inter-generational chasm that Levi's ability to quote Dante cannot close. Where teaching is connected with the survival of civilization in the first work, in the last work, it is connected to the failure of the aging survivor to communicate his experiences. If Levi's deposition is to have a general significance, something other than conventional pedagogy must be employed. And this will be the role of the gray zone.

IV

²³ Brombert goes on to suggest that

the teaching process is moreover embedded in the literary substance: Virgil, the Roman Poet, has learned from his Greek master Homer, just as Dante has been inspired by his "maestro" Virgil. The notion of such a train extending all the way to the present itself transmits a message across time. The direct relevance of Levi's "Canto of Ulysses" chapter is thus not only the subject of hell – a hell on earth more hellish than anything Dante could have imagined; it is the theme of communication and a lesson across time. (117)

How to establish that "lesson across time" is the central concern of Levi's last book. Much has been written about Levi's use of Dante. See, for example: Victor Brombert, *Musings on Mortality: From Tolstoy to Primo Levi* (Chicago: Univ. Press of Chicago, 2013), 141-65; Rita B. Sodi, *A Dante of Our Time: Primo Levi and Auschwitz* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990); and Nicholas Patruno, "Primo Levi, Dante, and the 'Canto of Ulysses,'" in *The Legacy of Primo Levi*, ed. Stanislao G. Pugliese (New York: Palgrave 2005), 33-41.

In interviews from the mid-1980s, Levi often described his last work as having a pedagogical intent. For instance, in an interview with Milvia Spadi from 1986, Levi, when asked to describe his reason for writing *The Drowned and the Saved*, gave the following explanation:

I realized especially through the reactions of my younger readers, that we are living at an anti-historic moment. My first books are widely read in Italy. I know even through the letters I receive, and I receive a lot, that they stir up feelings, and a sense of participation. But it is as if it concerned an event that no longer involved us, no longer involved Europe, or our century. [...] On top of that, we have seen the attempt to deny the truth of genocide altogether. So this process of the dissolution and annihilation of the facts is intensifying [...]

I insist on the fact that even the oppressors of those times were creatures like us. It is kind of an extreme simplification that my young readers perform when, reading my books, especially the first, they think of a humanity cut in two. On the one side, there are supposed to be the butchers, who are monsters. And we are the innocents. That is why I believe that the second chapter of this latest book [*The Drowned and the Saved*] is the most important. It is called 'The Grey Zone.' (qtd. in Anissimov 386-7).

Levi here describes his last work as an active response to the ways that his earlier works were being interpreted and simplified by young readers; how, in other words, they were contributing to the fatal slide of Holocaust memory that he set out to arrest. It should be

said, however, that Levi's young readers are not entirely to blame for misreading and simplifying Levi's earlier work. *Survival in Auschwitz* leaves readers with the searing image of the absolute victim, those non-men and women who inhabit a realm between life and death. In that work, the image of these *Musselmänner* encloses, for Levi, "all the evil of our time" (90). Additionally, the first work's narrative arc from incarceration to freedom invites the same kind of romantic stereotypes expressed by Levi's young student. His last work looks away from the image of the absolute victim, to focus instead on the costs of survival within the camps. The chapter on the gray zone, which he describes as the most important chapter of his last work, serves to derail the kind of simplistic and mythic account of the Holocaust currently in circulation.

In an interview from 1979, Levi first addressed the question of why, after such a long absence, he chose to return to the scene of the crime in what would become his last work. Levi focused on the book's narrative strategy:

It seems to me that the subject of the camps is topical. To re-examine the experience of the camp thirty-five years after. To judge it with the eyes of the indifferent, the eyes of the young man who knows nothing about these things, and even with the eyes of the opposition. The outcome may be a sociological study, already attempted by others, no doubt, but in which I believe that I have something very personal to say. It has to do with assuming a position on the edge of ambiguity. (qtd. in Anissimov 383)

After thirty-five years, Levi sought to approach the topic of the camps through the eyes of a "young man" who knew nothing about what had taken place. The choice, and the writerly challenge, to orient himself towards the past from such a vantage point seems

like a remarkable task for an aging survivor. Indeed, where Ozick suggests that Levi stops “acting” the part of the civilized survivor in his last work, and that his anger authentically asserts itself against his civilized image, Levi, in this interview, seems to describe his last work as a civilized and civilizing effort, a work in which he took on a perspective most foreign to his own, willing to explore “the very edge of ambiguity.” It is through this focus on ambiguity that Levi aims to correct a way of thinking about the past that he associates with his young readers, and which was powerfully dramatized through the anecdote about the young student.

“The Gray Zone” chapter begins not with a description of the zone itself – that comes slowly and in pieces – but with an admission of failure. “Have we,” asks Levi, “we who have returned – been able to understand and make others understand our experience?” (36). The question that casts a long shadow over the last work. But instead of directing blame towards any particular party, Levi goes on to equate the act of “understanding” with a “profound simplification.” Without such simplifications, Levi says, we would experience the world as an “infinite, undefined tangle that would defy our ability to orient ourselves and decide upon our actions” (DS 36). If, however, simplification is required for understanding, it is also a problem, especially when it comes to the Holocaust.

Levi associates this simplification with the way that history is taught. In the classroom, in Levi’s understanding, complex phenomena are reduced to simplistic accounts and easy lessons. Levi explains:

Popular history, and also the history taught in schools, is influenced by this Manichaeian tendency, which shuns half-tints and complexities: it is

prone to reduce the river of human occurrences to conflicts, and the conflicts to duels – we and they, Athenians and Spartans, Romans and Carthaginians. (DS 37)

Levi goes on to associate this propensity for Manichaeic thought with youth: “The young above all demand clarity, a sharp cut; their experience of the world being meager, they do not like ambiguity” (DS 37). The young, says Levi, feel “the need, to separate evil from good, to be able to take sides, to emulate Christ’s gesture on Judgment day: here the righteous, over there the reprobates” (DS 37).²⁴ For Levi, this demand for moral clarity affects their understanding of the past, and while the desire for simplification is justified, it “does not always apply to the simplification itself, which is a working hypothesis, useful as long as it is recognized as such and not mistaken for reality” (DS 37). Youth, in Levi’s last work, is the period in the life cycle associated with such confusion.

Levi sets out to implode these tendencies toward simplification and distortion through his strategic orientation towards the gray zone – a zone that temporarily suspends our ability to judge. Yet before describing the figures who occupy the zone, Levi starts by making an important comparison between the young and the “newcomers to the Lagers, whether young or not” (DS 37). These newcomers, Levi tells us, arrived in the camps armed with conceptual models that left them ill-equipped to deal with the fiercely individualistic realities of camp life. They entered the camps, says Levi, hoping to find a terrible but decipherable world, in conformity with that simple model which we atavistically carry within us – ‘we’ inside and the enemy

²⁴ In his earlier works, Levi championed youth as a period when “we are capable of reason yet still susceptible to change, to the influence of friends and teachers” (Magavern 181). In an interview with Philip Roth, Levi says that the fact of his youth allowed him to live his “Auschwitz year in a condition of exceptional spiritedness” (“Shop Talk” 8). In his last work, he would describe ‘youth’ along very different lines.

outside, separated by a sharply defined geographic frontier.” Instead of a world organized around an easily recognizable set of oppositions, the new arrival discovered a world that did not conform to any models. (DS 38)

Through a series of associations that link the young to the newcomers to the Lager, Levi focuses on an experience defined by the shattering of one’s conceptual models, firmly held assumptions, and the demand for moral clarity. This is not to say that he aims to turn those who were not there into secondary witnesses – far from it. Instead, that he wants to find a way to challenge the interpretive strategies of his young readers, and he does so, as we will see, by arranging various figures and scenes along a gray spectrum that connects – without conflating – the terrifying reality within the camps to the small complicities that unfold within everyday life.

From the terrifying initiation process, Levi focuses on those inmates who managed to adapt to the *univers concentrationnaire*, and for the rest of the chapter, he shines his analytic light on a collection of “obscene or pathetic figures (sometimes they possess both qualities simultaneously)” who occupy the space “which separates (and not only in the Nazi Lagers) the victims from the persecutors” (DS 40). Having passed through the gates into this foreign world, Levi exposes his young readers, those people who know nothing about the camps, to the gray specimens that, he says, are “indispensable to know if we want to know the human species, if we want to know how to do defend our souls when a similar test should once more loom before us, or even if we only want to understand what takes place in a big industrial factory” (DS 40).

Once inside, Levi draws our attention to what he calls the most degraded aspect of National Socialism: the creation of the group of *Sonderkommandos* (or SK), the Jews

who were in charge of running the crematoria. At a distance of almost forty years, and with a wealth of accumulated knowledge about the layout and operation of the camp system, Levi, could have written about any number of figures and features of the camps, yet he focuses on these prisoners, who, for the sake of their own survival, contributed to the running of the crematoria. This group of prisoners, like the gray zone itself, “contains an incredibly complicated internal structure,” and he reminds us that these figures confuse “our need to judge” (DS 42). Levi is here drawing an important parallel between the newcomers’ initial inability to understand the camp’s internal structure and the readers’ inability to judge these figures that populate the gray zone. The radical ambiguity associated with the gray zone challenges facile judgments and the simplistic narratives that accompany them. Where his earlier works delegate the act of judgment to the reader, a move enabled by his decision not to speak in the voice of the victim, his last work exposes readers to a zone and a set of figures that temporarily suspend his young readers’ ability to judge.²⁵

Levi anticipates and responds to the fact that readers — young readers — in their eagerness for moral clarity, will want to turn away from the terrifying reality of these special squads. And it is precisely this desire that Levi seeks to offset:

It is neither easy nor agreeable to dredge this abyss of viciousness, and yet I think it must be done, because what could be perpetrated yesterday could be attempted again tomorrow, could overwhelm us and our children. One is tempted to turn away with a grimace and close one’s mind: this is a

²⁵ Levi, in an Afterword published in 1976 with the popular school edition of *Survival in Auschwitz*, spoke of his decision to repress hatred in favor of justice. He claims that set out to purge his writing of any “lamenting tones of the victim” and the “irate voice of someone who seeks revenge” (qtd. in VOM 186). He did so in order not to pass judgment himself, but rather to prepare “the ground for the judge. The judges are my readers” (qtd. in VOM 186).

temptation one must resist. In fact, the existence of the squads had a meaning, a message: “We, the master race, are your destroyers, but you are no better than we are; if we so wish, and we do so wish, we can destroy not only your bodies but also your souls, just as we have destroyed ours.” (DS 54-55)

Recognizing the remarkable ease with which souls can be destroyed confuses us in our need to judge to the same extent that the SK confuses the easy categories of victim and victimizer. Nevertheless, Levi is clear that the need for a confusion of judgment is not an argument for the eradication of judgment. Ultimately, it is essential that we not confuse the murderers with their victims, for to do so, he says, “is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity, above all, it is a precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth” (DS 49).

The apparent equivalence of the SK and the Nazis, the confusion of victim and victimizer, depends upon the mimetic relation between them. To shed light on the illusory nature of this mimetic relation, Levi considers a soccer match described by Miklos Nyiszle, a Hungarian physician and one of the few surviving members of the SK that took place between members of the SS and SK on the lawn of Auschwitz. The scene, says Debarti Sanyal, can be read as a

simulation of the camp’s structure and a symbol of its investment in universal guilt, quite literally makes sport of the incontrovertible distinction between executioners and victims. It illustrates the gray zone’s function as an aporetic space where extreme and norm converge and

where victims, perpetrators, and witnesses seem to exchange positions with the fluidity of a soccer ball's course on the village green. (2)

While some critics have made much of the production of normality in the midst of annihilation, Levi, who devotes a short paragraph to the soccer game, draws our attention to the incommensurable realities between the reality of genocide and the fiction of equality. This leveling, he tells us, was integral feature of Nazi ideology. He ventriloquizes the Nazi position as follows: "We have embraced you, corrupted you, dragged you down to the bottom with us. You are like us, you proud people: dirtied with your own blood, as we are. You too, like us and like Cain, have killed the brother. Come, we can play together" (DS 55).

Levi passes from the extreme example of the SK through a series of events and people who occupy positions along the "gray band, that zone of ambiguity which radiates outwards from regimes based on terror and obsequiousness" (DS 58). From the members of the SK Levi then turns his attention to the duplicitous figure of Chaim Rumkowski, the man who occupies a central role within the chapter. After having attained a small degree of power within the Lodz ghetto, and fueled by a pathetic sense of pride, Rumkowski seized the opportunity to assume control of the ghetto. As an "energetic, uncultivated, and authoritarian man" who "passionately loved authority," Rumkowski, a Jew, clung to his position as president of the ghetto despite the fact that his administrative efforts had disastrous consequences for his fellow Jews (DS 64). After helping the Nazis liquidate the ghetto, he was sent off to the camps himself. "Drenched in duplicity", he was a degraded figure who clung to any sign of privilege, hoping that it might ensure his own survival and the survival of others.

For Levi, the story of Chaim Rumkowski “sums up in itself the entire theme of grey zone” (66). Rumkowski was not a monster, and he should not be judged as one, nor does Levi, as Leonard claims, “relish the sleazy story” of this man (30). He was simply a man who sought to save himself through collaboration. However, the everydayness of his collaboration differed from the terrifying image of the SK, and, as such, he stands at the other end of the gray band. Levi identifies in Rumkowski’s story a “sense urgency and threat” that speaks to the tight compact between small complicities and the larger engine of genocide: “We are all mirrored in Rumkowski,” says Levi, “his ambiguity is ours, it is our second nature, we hybrids molded from clay and spirit” (DS 69).

It is in the person of Rumkowski that Levi asks his readers to find their reflections. A figure who, like the Kapos and Lager functionaries, and like all those who “shake their heads but acquiesce,” displayed a willingness to serve a regime to whose misdeeds he remained “willingly blind” (Drowned 68). “Like Rumkowski,” Levi reminds us,

we too are so dazzled by power and prestige as to forget our essential fragility. Willingly or not we come to terms with power, forgetting that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the ghetto reigns the lords of death, and that close by the train is waiting. (69)

Levi does not suggest that his readers are interchangeable with Rumkowski, that they are guilty of his crimes, but rather that they should see in Rumkowski a shared potential to let things slide, to look away, to become small accomplices of a larger regime.

Describing this gray band over the course of the chapter, Levi presents a new kind of lineage, one that replaces the chain that we have previously seen connecting Homer,

Virgil, Dante, Levi and the reader, with a chain that links big and small complicities to the potential complicities of us all.²⁶ Through this chain, Levi encourages his readers to reflect on the strength of their own “moral armature,” and to recognize their own capacity to forget their “essential fragility,” that all are too easily “dazzled by power and prestige” (DS 69). Through his emphasis on the infinite gradations of responsibility, human weakness, and moral ambivalence that extend from life within the Lager to the present, Levi reconciled the historical passing of generations to the enduring moral crisis that the Holocaust presents to us all. Leon Wieseltier once described Levi as the greatest of the modern rationalists, a man with “night vision,” who “demanded of reason what Milton demanded of virtue, that it not be a youngling in the contemplation of evil” (“Moral Obligation” xv). Through his last work, and especially the chapter on the gray zone, Levi taught his young readers, those with whom he most desperately wanted to communicate, how not to be younglings in the contemplation of evil, and how to resist that interminable desire to reduce the world to tidy poles and simple narratives that allow one to temporarily forget.

But Levi’s rendering of the gray zone has certainly moved beyond the realm of Holocaust studies. The description of a zone so disorienting that it cannot be fully understood, and which prevents facile forms of assimilation, has become, in the hands of

²⁶ In the South African context, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s report set out to address the Commission’s failure to recognize the potential for evil within the self. The following passage from the report, which was placed under the heading of “Responsibility and Reconciliation,” described the problem as follows:

First, drawing attention of the public to the deeds of the exceptional perpetrator led to a ‘fail[ure] to recognize the ‘little perpetrator’ in each of us’; whereas ‘it is only by recognizing the potential for evil in each one of us that we can take full responsibility for ensuring that such evil will never be repeated.’” (qtd. in Sanders 3)

The failure to recognize the “little perpetrator in each of us,” was precisely the issue that Levi sought to address through his emphasis on the gray zone and the figure of Rumkowski. How J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* responds to this problem is the subject of the fourth chapter.

subsequent writers, associated with the zone of fiction itself. The gray zone's blurring of orienting boundaries, which looks back to a universe so different from the one we inhabit after Auschwitz, can be aligned with literature's subversion of any kind of moral, ethical, biographical or political considerations. And Levi's attempts to protect the Holocaust against the slide towards simplification and stereotype through recourse to the gray zone, serves a powerful 'late strategy' for novelists concerned about the ways that their works of art will be similarly read as simple expositions of the author's life.

These shared concerns, which only intensify with age, unite Levi's last works with the final installment of Philip Roth's long running *Zuckerman* series. In *Exit Ghost*, a *Vollendungsroman* set in 2004, Roth entwines the aging Zuckerman's fears about memory loss and the end of his career as a writer and lover with concerns about the aging and death of those survivors and writers who founded the Holocaust discourses of the mid-twentieth century. Like Levi's last work, it, too, looks for ways to protect the historical events and works of art from the inevitable simplifications brought on by the passage of time. Roth figures this passage as the approach of the "shadow line," which will turn the Holocaust from "contemporary" to "remote history" (Assmann 271). The historian, Assmann writes, in a world without living witnesses, can "claim unrivaled authority" as "a reconstructor or interpreter of the past" (271). The theme of the crossing of this shadow line, which looks back to Conrad's late novel of the same name, unites Levi's last work and Roth's late novel. How Roth responds to the impact of the passage of time on Holocaust memory, and the role that Levi and his last work plays in the process, is the subject of the next chapter

CHAPTER TWO

From Anne Frank to Primo Levi: Philip Roth's Aging Holocaust

He is over seventy, and age makes a difference—and the difference that it makes is a central subject of the novel.

– Philip Roth¹

Only certain artists and thinkers care enough about their métier to believe that it too ages and must face death with failing senses and memory.

– Edward Said²

This chapter compares Roth's use of Anne Frank in *The Ghost Writer*, a *Bildungsroman* and the first installment of Roth's Zuckerman series, with his late life reflections on Primo Levi's legacy in *Exit Ghost*, a *Vollendungsroman* and the final book in the series. I argue that Levi's conceptions of old age, complicity, and generational distance are crucial for a proper understanding of Roth's novel, because they shed light on both the motivations and the limitations of the late-life alliance that the novel depicts between two Jews with very different twentieth-century biographies: the seventy-one-year-old American writer, Nathan Zuckerman, and the seventy-five-year-old Holocaust survivor, Amy Bellette. The novel, I argue, entwines Nathan's fears about the end of his career as a writer with concerns about the end of Holocaust memory – concerns represented by Amy's aging body and brain. To make sense of these fears, and to shed light on her dead lover's struggle to produce a novel at the end of his own life, Amy turns to Primo Levi and his last work, *The Drowned and the Saved*. The earlier novel, *The*

¹ Hermione Lee, "Age Makes a Difference: Interview with Philip Roth," in *The New Yorker* 83.29 (2007), 59.

² Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 24.

Ghost Writer, hinged on the idea of the vast gulf between the European genocide and Jewish life in America, but in *Exit Ghost* the experience of the universal constraints of late life allow the distance between the American Zuckerman and the European Bellette to be temporarily, if only fictionally, collapsed.

Although they only met briefly in 1986, first in London and then a few days later in Turin, Philip Roth and Primo Levi — who died the following year — connected in a way that has led Roth to comment upon the encounter several times in the years since. “With some people you just unlock — and Levi was one of them,” Roth told Ian Thomson, one of Levi’s biographers, in 1994 (460).³ The American author of *Portnoy’s Complaint* and the Italian Holocaust writer who, as Tony Judt once said, “wrote in a different key from the rest,” made an unlikely pair (56). Their time together resulted in an interview that appeared on the first page of the *New York Times Book Review*.⁴ A single photograph, published with the interview, provides a revealing visual record of the meeting.

The two men are standing in front of a bookshelf in Levi’s Turin apartment, the same apartment on *Corso Umberto* that Levi’s family had occupied for three generations. The diminutive Levi, celebrated for his enduring humanism and moral poise, is overshadowed by the taller, heavily bearded American, iconic figure of the modern novelist, whose characters are known for their operatic desires and relentless self-examination. Despite their differences, the European writer and his American counterpart

³ For an account of their relationship see Ian Thompson, *Primo Levi: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002), 478-481; and Claudia Roth Pierpont, *Roth Unbound: A Writer and His Books* (New York: Farrar, Staus and Giroux, 2013), 163-5. To better understand Roth’s impact on Levi’s career in America see Michael Rothberg and Jonathan Druker, “A Secular Alternative: Primo Levi’s Place in American Holocaust Discourse” *Shofar* 28.1 (2009).

⁴ Roth’s interview with Levi is reprinted in Philip Roth, *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 1-17.

seem at ease with each other. In their reading of the photo, Michael Rothberg and Jonathan Druker suggest that we can see “something of the distance that separates Europe and the United States,” something of the gap that interested Roth between American and European Jews (125). In “Roth’s appreciative gaze,” they go on to say, we can detect an “openness – however belated – to the message Levi tried to convey” (125). While Roth may certainly have been “open” to the content of Levi’s message in 1986, it was only with the 2007 publication of *Exit Ghost*, a *Vollendungsroman* focalized by the seventy-one-year-old Nathan Zuckerman, that Roth would more fully reckon with Levi, his legacy, and the chasm separating the Holocaust in Europe from the discourses shaping Holocaust memory within Jewish communities in America.

Exit Ghost finalizes the Zuckerman series begun with *The Ghost Writer*, a *Bildungsroman* set in 1956. The presence of Holocaust icon Primo Levi in *Exit Ghost* can’t help but recall the presence of Holocaust icon Anne Frank in *The Ghost Writer*. Levi’s last work, *The Drowned and the Saved*, which returns to the scenes and themes of his first book, *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947), provides a template for the ways that *Exit Ghost* returns to and revises the themes and characters from *The Ghost Writer*.⁵ The late-life act of looking back upon events from a distance of years aligns Levi’s late-life fidelity to Holocaust memory with Nathan’s late-life fears about the end of his career and Amy’s fears about the legacy of her long-dead lover. Much has been written about Anne Frank’s presence in *The Ghost Writer*. Far less attention, however, has been paid to

⁵ Alvin Rosenfeld describes Levi’s first work as an inversion of the *Bildungsroman*, a work that foregrounds the process of having to unlearn what it means to be civilized (“Double” 29).

Levi's place in *Exit Ghost*, or to the significance of the bookending of the series with the young Frank and the aging Levi.⁶ This chapter aims to correct that imbalance.

Criticism on the role and significance of the Holocaust in Roth's work has tended to focus on the divide between American and European Jewish experience. Steven Milowitz, in the first full-length monograph on Roth's relation to the Holocaust, argues that the Holocaust is the foundational event in Roth's fiction. Roth's work, he argues, "begins and ends in the tragedy of history, in the post-pastoral universe inherited from the fact of the concentration camps" (xi). A form of Holocaust consciousness animates the "new modern sensibility [that] provokes Roth's harried characters," a sensibility scorched and haunted by the magnitude of what took place in Europe (xi). Roth's "harried" American Jewish characters, animated by a Holocaust consciousness, desperately struggle to reconcile the prosperity and safety of their lives in America with the terrifying events that shaped the lives of their European counterparts.

Where Milowitz emphasizes the pressure exerted by the Holocaust on the mental lives of Roth's American characters, Michael Rothberg argues that Roth is not principally concerned with the Holocaust and its impact on American life, but with the distance separating these prosperous Jewish lives in America from the experiences of European Jewry. Rothberg argues that Roth illuminates the "unbridgeable distance between the Holocaust and American life – and the inauthenticity of most attempts to lessen that

⁶ Eric Sundquist, one of the few scholars to consider Levi's place in the novel, offers the following comparison between Anne's presence in *The Ghost Writer* and Levi's presence in *Exit Ghost*: "Where Anne appears in *The Ghost Writer* as if one of Levi's 'drowned,' those 'true witnesses who saw the Gorgon [but] have not returned to tell about it.' In *Exit Ghost* it is Levi himself who returns, elusively inhabiting the novel like Eliot's 'familiar ghost / Both intimate and unidentifiable,' hidden but not forgotten, like the Holocaust itself" (253). Sundquist's reading of Levi's presence in the novel looks back to Roth's claim that: "For most American Jews, it [the Holocaust] is simply there, hidden, submerged, emerging, disappearing, unforgotten. You don't make use of it – it makes use of you" ("Reading" 118). In fact, Roth goes on to say, without the word "Holocaust there would be no Nathan Zuckerman": "If you take away that word – and with it the fact – none of these Zuckerman books would exist" ("Reading" 117).

distance” (“Roth and the Holocaust” 53). The emphasis on distance, Rothberg goes on to say, leads to the paradox at the heart of Roth’s perspective: “the greater the significance accorded to the Holocaust as an event of modern history, the more distant a role it plays in the lives of American Jews” (“Roth and the Holocaust” 53).⁷ Roth’s work registers the contradictions of a coming world without witnesses, where, on the one hand, denial and distortion have more free play, while, on the other hand, the facts of the Holocaust become more detailed, voluminous, and meticulous than ever, through a growing body of scholarship. This paradox, according to the Alvin Rosenfeld, leads to what he calls in the provocative title of a recent work, “The End of the Holocaust.” Rosenfeld worries about how the intense attention paid to the Holocaust within popular culture removes the sense of “scandal that necessarily should attend it” (11). The problem is not forgetting, but dilution, and a growing sense of distance: “The very success of the Holocaust’s wide dissemination in the public sphere,” Rosenfeld says, “can work to undermine its gravity and render it a familiar thing” (11).

In interviews, Roth describes as the subject matter of his early work the distance that separated American and European Jewish experience :

The disparity between this tragic dimension of Jewish life in Europe and the actualities of our daily lives as Jews in New Jersey was something that I had to puzzle over myself, and indeed, it was in the vast discrepancy

⁷ Rothberg also points out that most “critical work on Roth has failed to historicize his responses to the Holocaust” (53). “His works,” he goes on to say, “are inevitably in dialogue with the larger context and changing patterns of Holocaust reception in the United States...Indeed, Roth’s life and work correspond in fascinating ways with the narrative of the Holocaust’s reception in the United States that can be found in Peter Novick’s authoritative history *The Holocaust in American Life*” (53). This chapter on Roth, which focuses on the shift from Anne Frank to Primo Levi, develops Rothberg’s claim. However, in addition to focusing on the ways that Roth’s work responds to the reception of the Holocaust in America, I focus on how the aging process interacts with that reception history.

between the two Jewish conditions that I found the terrain for my first stories and later for *Portnoy's Complaint*.” (Searles 159)⁸

This distance along with facile or fictional attempts to collapse it are put on display and satirized in *The Ghost Writer*, through the young Nathan's decision to imaginatively bring Anne Frank back to life. By the time we get to *Exit Ghost*, however, the novelist is more concerned with protecting the past and with defending not satirizing the rights of the imagination. The reunion between the aging Bellette and the aging Nathan is made possible through the shared constraints of old age, and a shared desire to defend the literary legacy of the writer they both loved. The full transition from the *Bildungsroman* of *The Ghost Writer* to the *Vollendungsroman* of *Exit Ghost* is itself an object lesson in the historical and gerontological issues at stake in Roth's fictional reckoning with the Holocaust and its place in America. To understand the transition, we must begin with Anne's role in *The Ghost Writer*, and how she enables Nathan to authenticate positions very much in opposition to his parents' form of Holocaust Judaism.

II

⁸ In Roth's *Operation Shylock*, the fictional character also named Philip Roth points to this “vast discrepancy” as the basis of his friendship with survivor and writer, Aharon Appelfeld. The following passage, which anticipates the relationship between Nathan and Amy Bellette in *Exit Ghost*, addresses the possibility of friendship based on the recognition of this “vast discrepancy”:

Because Aharon and I each embody the reverse of the other's experience; because each recognizes in the other the Jewish man he is not; because of the all but incompatible orientations that shape our very different lives and very different books and that result from antithetical twentieth-century Jewish biographies; because we are the heirs jointly of a drastically bifurcated legacy – because of the sum of all these Jewish antinomies, yes, we have much to talk about and are intimate friends. (“Operation Shylock” 201)

Published in 1979 and narrating a fiction set in 1956, *The Ghost Writer* is a self-conscious *Bildungsroman* that follows the young Nathan Zuckerman's complicated and somewhat perverse introduction into the world of letters. In doing so, it shamelessly takes the Holocaust as subject available for literary invention, a move that flaunts the need for fidelity to the facts that has exerted such pressure on Holocaust writing. As a young and aspiring writer, Nathan relishes the opportunity to transgress the line between fact and fiction, and this move draws attention to the historically situated nature of the event of writing. Indeed, as we'll see, the Anne that Nathan invents is a response to the Anne that was recreated for the famous 1956 Broadway production of Anne Frank's Diary. This Anne, with her universal message of hope and the innocence associated with her youthful longings, was tailor-made for American audiences. As an assimilated non-Zionist whose diary ends with her capture (rather than, say, beginning there), Anne offered American audiences, and especially American Jews eager to assimilate, a more palatable Holocaust story. In the process, Anne's Diary helped American audiences to look away from the most terrifying events of the Holocaust. Nathan, the aspiring young writer, didn't need to invent Anne; he only needed to reflect the fact that she was already an American invention.

Yet what grabs readers initially about Roth's novel is not Anne's place in it, but the young narrator's sense of himself as a *Bildungsroman* hero. In the novel's opening sentence, he describes himself as both the hero of the *Bildungsroman* that is *The Ghost Writer*, and also as a young character within the novel hoping to write his own *Bildungsroman*:

It was the last hour of daylight of a December afternoon more than twenty years ago – I was twenty-three, writing and publishing my first stories, and like many *Bildungsroman* hero before me, already contemplating my own massive *Bildungsroman* – when I arrived at the hideaway to meet the great man. (“Ghost Writer” 3)⁹

From the start, the narrator tells us not only that he is looking back on events that took place years ago, but that his life and his literary quest has been mediated by previous fictions. The reflexivity, a hallmark of Roth’s work, shows the form of double consciousness that the novel so effectively employs. We quickly learn, however, that Nathan’s literary ambition is fueled, at least in part, by his efforts to escape the confines of his parents post-Holocaust Judaism. Where his parents remain consumed with the events of the Holocaust and the possibility of its repetition in America, Nathan experiences the Holocaust, and the demand to identify with the victims, as an impediment to his literary ambition. The tension between his desire for a life of art, understood to be unburdened by traumatic history, and his parents’ form of historical consciousness becomes the basis for the inter-generational argument that drives the novel.

Their dispute centers on the upcoming publication of one of Nathan’s short stories entitled, “Higher Education.” The story, based on events that took place among members of Nathan’s extended family, focuses on a fight over inheritance that ends with a surprising, and seemingly unrelated, act of violence. Nathan’s parents ostensibly support their son’s literary ambition, but “Higher Education” commits what they take to be an unpardonable sin: it exposes an already victimized people to more ridicule, casting Jews in such a way as to confirm anti-Semitic stereotypes. Roth himself faced similar criticism

⁹ Hereafter abbreviated GW and cited parenthetically in the text.

from within the Jewish community following the publication of his first collection of short stories, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959). “Higher Education,” and the criticism it receives within *The Ghost Writer*, can be read as a parodic rendition of the same criticism hurled at Roth following the publication of the stories collected in *Goodbye, Columbus*. Both works were accused of portraying Jews in a negative light, and of encouraging Anti-Semitic stereotypes. In response, Roth wrote a series of essays (“Some New Jewish Stereotypes,” and “Writing About Jews”) to defend himself and his work.¹⁰ *The Ghost Writer*, which satirizes the ways that Nathan’s stories were being critiqued from within the Jewish community, functions as a fictional counterpart to Roth’s early essays.

Nathan’s father tells him that people “don’t read art – they read *people*. And they judge them as such” (GW 92). These imagined gentile readers who are unable to differentiate between art and life will use the story of “Jews behaving badly” as another example of “Kikes and their love of money” (GW 94). Then, linking the Anti-Semitism expressed by such “run-of-the-mill Americans” with the Anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany, Nathan’s father performs the signature action associated with figures of Jewish authority within the novel: he conflates the European past with the American present, and, as a result, justifies the demand that his son place Jewish survival ahead of his desire for artistic freedom. Additionally, Nathan’s father attempts to prevent the publication of the story by comparing his son to the figure of the bystander from Holocaust literature. Like the bystanders whose passivity and willed blindness was an essential feature of the Nazi machine, Nathan, at least according to his father, refuses to see the impact that his story will have on Jewish lives in the present: “But what I can’t accept,” the father says, “is

¹⁰ These essays can be found in Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Vintage, 1985), 183-212.

what you don't see – what you don't *want* to see” (GW 94). What he doesn't want to see, to elaborate his father's objections, is the compact between artistic license and fantasy and the history of Jewish annihilation. Nathan believes in the autonomy of the aesthetic, which draws a line between art and life, and frees him from an obligation to the European genocide that, according to Nathan's father, destroyed the separation between art and life. From his father's perspective, Nathan has two options: he can either write stories that advance positive images of Jews or he can write “honest” accounts of Jews that will expose him to intense criticism from within the Jewish community. In other words, one might say, he must choose between being a victim, engaged in truth speaking and warding off evil, or be a collaborator, on the wrong side of Jewish history. The father attributes his son's willingness to publish such a story to the fact that he has lived such a sheltered life in America surrounded by other sheltered Jews. Only in such a protected world could Nathan remain so blind to the facts.

Nathan's mother, for her part, launches a campaign to prevent the story's publication, a campaign that also imagines Nathan as a Nazi collaborator. A few weeks after receiving a letter from Judge Wapter, the central figure of Jewish authority within the novel, Nathan's mother calls her son in a panic. He has apparently refused to respond to the judge's letter, which admonished him for seeking to publish the story.¹¹ The letter ends with the judge's recommendation that Nathan see the new Broadway production of the *Diary of Anne Frank*. The judge hopes that Anne's universal story will awaken

¹¹ Nathan's mother interprets his silence as a sign of disrespect towards the man whose letter of recommendation helped get him into the University of Chicago. In his letter to Nathan, the judge asks him to consider if he would publish the story during Hitler's reign of terror. Like Nathan's father, the judge conflates past and present circumstances, forcing Nathan to evaluate his decision as if the Nazi past were unfolding in the present. The disagreement puts on display the tension between competing views of historical identity. Where Nathan's connection to the past is based on discontinuity, the judge, like Nathan's parents, sees continuity as the only means of connecting with the Jewish past.

Nathan's Jewish conscience, and, in turn, stop the publication of the incendiary short story, "Higher Education." The production of Anne's diary, at least according to Judge Wapter, would help Nathan to better understand what Jews are really about. Yet this notion that the Broadway Anne should be seen as a representative Jew and an iconic Holocaust victim is precisely what the novel satirizes.

At the height of their argument, the mother in a sense ventriloquizes the judge's argument, begging her son to see himself a victim of the genocide that killed so many Jews just like him. During the argument, Nathan rages:

"The Big Three, Mama! Streicher, Goebbels, and your son! What about the Judge's humility? Where's his modesty?"

"He only meant that what happened to the Jews –"
"In Europe – not in Newark! We are not the wretched of Belsen! We were not the victims of the that crime!"

"But we could be – in their place we would be. Nathan, violence is nothing new to the Jews, you know that!"

"Ma, you want to see physical violence done to the Jews of Newark, go to the office of the plastic surgeon where the girls get their noses fixed. That's where the blood flows in Essex County, that's where the blow is delivered – with a mallet! To their bones – and to their pride!"

(GW 106)

Nathan's mother wants her son to identify with the victims and to see the shared experience of suffering as the unifying feature of Jewish life. By conflating metaphorical and literal victimization, a move that anticipates the claims made by trauma theorists,

Nathan's mother hopes to awaken her son to the trans-historical reality of anti-Semitism.¹² Nathan's mother, in essence, wants her son to feel as though he himself had survived the Holocaust, a move that threatens to recast the genocide as the foundational event grounding Jewish identity.¹³ To be a Jew, as she sees it, means to see oneself as a perpetual victim in a never-ending tragedy that is disarticulated from any Biblical or Rabbinic traditions. But while the novel reflects on the formation of this version of Holocaust Judaism, it also, through Nathan's response to his mother, suggests that this distance-denying discourse, and the cult of victimhood it enables, allows Jews to overlook the risks associated with assimilation in present day America — a move, it should be said, that seeks to draw attention away from Nathan himself.

At the end of the argument, Nathan tells his mother to forget about the threat to Jewish existence posed by creative writers, and to focus instead on the plastic surgeons who are reconfiguring the faces of Newark's Jewish girls. In their desire to conform to American standards of beauty, to erase the difference of their Jewish faces, Jews have replaced the violence imposed on them from outside with forms of self-willed violence. In this way, the young Nathan draws attention to the parallelism between the destruction of Jewish life during the Holocaust, and the modern threat to Jewish spiritual survival caused by assimilation into American society. This has become a discourse common among American Jewish communal leaders since the 1960s. Increasingly concerned with

¹² This conflation of past and present circumstances is not without its Jewish roots. The formation of Jewish identity has long depended on narrative rituals that seek to conflate past and present circumstances for the sake of group identity. The Passover Seder, for instance, revolves not only on the re-telling of the story of the Exodus from Egypt, but also, on the ritual reenactment of the departure, a performance scripted by the liturgy. The Jewish historian Yosef Yerushalmi explains: "The wounds inflicted upon Jewish life by the disintegrative blows of the last two hundred years have contributed to decline of Jewish memory that had previously been maintained by ritual whose mechanisms the past was once made present" (94).

¹³ For a larger discussion of the ways that the Holocaust has replaced the Exodus as the central event in Jewish life see Michael Goldberg, *Why Should Jews Survive: Looking Past the Holocaust Towards a Jewish Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

the impact of assimilation on Jewish consciousness, these leaders shifted from an emphasis on “integration” to “survival.” Consider Peter Novick’s account of this shift in strategic priorities that was well underway by the mid 1960s:

Integration – winning acceptance on every level of and in every area of American society – could hardly any longer be a priority, since it was an accomplished fact. But that acceptance came at a price. The survival to which Jewish leaders increasingly turned their attention did not mean the physical survival of Jews in a hostile environment. Rather it was the absence of hostility to Jews that was threatening...The word [Holocaust] used to describe the most ghastly consequences of murderous hostility towards Jews was also used to describe the predicted consequences toward Jews. (184-5).

These two forms of violence, however radically different, are both described with the term Holocaust.

To return to the novel, Nathan, instead of abandoning his literary ambitions and returning to the fold, seeks out a literary master to replace the role played by his parents in his life. This search leads him to Lonoff, the “great man” referred to in the novel’s opening sentence. Through his association with Lonoff, the celebrated Jewish American short story writer, Nathan seeks to escape his parents’ brand of Jewishness and to enter the rarefied air of American letters. At the start of the novel, he arrives at the Lonoff’s country retreat in the Berkshires where the middle-aged writer lives in relative seclusion. Here, surrounded by an isolated and depressed wife (humorously named Hope), Lonoff works tirelessly to create short stories that have been cleansed of history and references to

popular culture. For Nathan, Lonoff has attained a form of isolation and peace that stands in sharp contrast to his own familial entanglements. Captivated by his literary stature, Nathan isn't able to recognize the domestic strains that threaten to rip Lonoff's world apart. In the great man Nathan sees his own future: "All one's concentration and flamboyance and originality reserved for the grueling, exalted, transcendent calling. I looked around and I thought, This is how I will live" (GW 5). While his parents might be confused about the vast distance separating European and American Jewish experience, he seems equally confused about the chasm between the quality of Lonoff's life and the quality of his art, and not even the great man himself can straighten him out. Despite witnessing Hope's theatrical departure, and her replacement by Lonoff's beautiful and talented protégé, the young paramour Amy Bellette, and despite Lonoff's candid confession of his own limitations as a husband and father, Nathan remains impervious to the facts, unwilling to look past the art, and his idealized picture of a life so unlike his own.¹⁴

After hearing snippets of a conversation between Lonoff and Amy Bellette in an upstairs bedroom, Nathan fantasizes about having the courage as a writer to give voice to

¹⁴ Within the novel, the relationship between Nathan and Lonoff is mediated by Henry James' story, "The Middle Years." Despite Nathan's efforts to understand the story, he remains unable to see any connection between his own conversations with Lonoff and Dencombe's encounter with the young Doctor Hugh in "The Middle Years." But the association that Nathan misses the reader is encouraged to make. In the story, the aging Dencombe reflects on his life in middle age while suffering from a debilitating illness. He recognizes that he has wasted the best years of his life in the singular pursuit of art:

This was the pang that had been sharpest during the last few years – the sense of ebbing time, of shrinking opportunity; and now he felt not so much that his last chance was going as that it was gone indeed. He had done all that he should ever do, and yet he had not done what he wanted. This was the laceration – that practically his career was over: it was as violent as a rough hand at his throat. (339)

The young Doctor Hugh, who, like the young Nathan, "was too inflamed to be shrewd," focuses only on the power of his idol's prose and not the quality of his life. From the vantage point of youth, Dencombe's pain is impossible to see let alone to sympathize with. Similarly, in *The Ghost Writer*, Nathan idealizes Lonoff's life, remaining blind to the ways that it is unraveling before his eyes. In this vein, Elaine Safer argues that *The Ghost Writer* "parodies the endeavors of the creative writer, and – by implication – the creative process" ("Mocking" 23).

the “originality and excitement of what actually goes on.” Before doing so, however, he reflects on the costs of a life devoted to literary creation:

...what then would they think of me, my father and his judge? How would my elders hold up against that? And if they couldn't, if the blow to their sentiments was finally too wounding, just how well would I hold up against being hated and reviled and disowned? (GW 121)

By the start of the next chapter, the young Nathan has apparently made his decision.

With the conversation between Amy and Lonoff as a starting point, Nathan imagines that Amy is in fact Anne Frank, the writer of the Holocaust diary that had been adapted for the American stage only a year earlier, in 1955. In an act of unfettered invention, Nathan imagines that Frank actually survived the war and sought refuge in America. Nathan's story, in contrast to the stage play, does not shy away from the most painful features of Anne's life: he chronicles her experiences in Bergen Belsen, her trip to America, her decision to keep her identity a secret, the discovery that her father was still alive, and her desire to distance herself from her famous past by achieving literary fame in America. Like Nathan, Anne also looks to Lonoff for love and guidance, as a surrogate father who might help her to outrun the paralyzing force of her traumatic past. In Nathan's eyes, Lonoff is a man who has achieved a form of literary immortality. Compared to Nathan, Lonoff has managed to purge himself and his work of any Jewish features.

Nathan's Anne Frank thus bears a strong resemblance to her creator. After surviving the horrors of Bergen-Belsen, Nathan's Anne takes the name Amy in order to “forget her previous life,” and to “ensure that she is not reminded of it” (GW 125, 126).

After years of feeling as though she were the “incarnation of the millions of un-lived years robbed from the murdered Jews,” Anne wants nothing more than to lead a writer’s life in America, a life in which she is no longer seen as an emblem of that traumatic past (GW 150). “Responsibility to the dead,” says Anne, was only “rhetoric for the pious! There was nothing to give the dead – they were dead” (GW 149). All that her diary could accomplish, she surmises, is to commemorate the loved ones that she had lost: “There was her diary’s purpose, there was her ordained mission: to restore in print their status as flesh and blood...for all the good that would do them” (GW 147). This is not to say that she rejects the diary or its contribution to what she calls the “record of the misery,” nor does she look away from the fact that writing about her war time experiences helped her to survive the catastrophe: “Recording it was enduring it; the diary kept her company and it kept her sane, and whenever being her parents’ child seemed to her as harrowing as the war itself, it was where she went to confess” (GW 136). To craft her masterpiece, she recognizes that it was necessary for her to be steeped not in the Bible, but in Goethe and Dickens – those writers, she says, “gave her diary the power to make the nightmare real” (GW 144). The diary exposed the fact that no amount of high culture could protect the Jews. Despite listening to concerts by “Mozart, Brahms, and Beethoven, and [despite the fact that they] could entertain themselves with Goethe and Dickens...they were still set aside for slaughter” (GW 145). While assimilation was no protection against the force of baseless hatred, the literary tradition helped Anne to represent suffering and to expose Nazi anti-Semitism as based on imagined differences. Now, as a young aspiring writer in America, a country gifted in the art of forgetting, she wants to be known for “what she had made of herself since” (GW 132). Her greatest wish, we are told, is to become a

journalist and one day a famous writer (GW 138). In this way, Anne becomes an ironic mirror of Nathan's own literary ambition and his circumstances. Nathan becomes a ghostwriter, taking on Anne's voice in order to legitimate his own.

We can see then how Nathan's fantasy of Anne in some sense mediates the gap between Nathan and his parents. In that Anne Frank provided Americans with a compelling point of reference for a shared need to situate the self with regards to a trauma of such catastrophic magnitude as the Holocaust, she likewise mediated between America and the death camps. In his last work, Primo Levi claims that a single Anne Frank excites more emotions than the myriads who suffered and whose lives have remained in the shadows. "Perhaps it is necessary that it can be so," says Levi: "If we had to and were able to suffer the sufferings of everyone, we could not live" (DS 56). According to Levi, Anne helped to reconnect the enormous and abstract event of the Holocaust with the concrete voice and face of the individual, a move that spoke to our own need to limit our exposure to suffering. Further, James Young reminds us that for a generation of American Jews, Anne Frank was a "two-sided metonymy for both Jewishness and the Holocaust" (109-10).

Nevertheless, Anne's youthful face and her accessible story gave Americans a reprieve from the need to confront those terrifying pictures of the stacks of corpses and the empty, emaciated faces of the inmates hovering between life and death in the camps. The Anne that we remember, Alvin Rosenfeld reminds us, is the one that her father, Otto, worked so tirelessly to project – a character who was not subjugated by the forces of inhumanity and degradation. And this therapeutic and sentimental version of Holocaust memory is what *The Ghost Writer* is satirizing (Rosenfeld "The End" 147).

Nathan's creation of Anne in *The Ghost Writer* allows Nathan to absorb the past creatively and, as a result, to look forward to his as-yet-unrealized future. By the time of *Exit Ghost*, however, almost fifty years will have passed in Nathan's life and the backwards-looking action of the life review will predominate. At seventy-one, Nathan, having achieved recognition as a writer, is no longer at war with his parent's generation. The feelings that drove him to bring Anne back to life in his mid-twenties "had long since disappeared," he says in *Exit Ghost*, "along with the moral imperatives pressed upon me then by eminent elders of the Jewish community" ("Exit Ghost" 171).¹⁵ With his parent's dead and no children to outlive him, Nathan has become an elder statesman, a writer eager to protect the commitment to literature that defined his life. In the process, Anne Frank's ghostly presence is replaced by that of Primo Levi. Where Nathan created Anne in the novel of youth, in the novel of age, Levi guides Nathan through the troubled terrain of late life. With this in mind I want to turn my attention to *Exit Ghost*, and to Levi's place within the novel.

III

Exit Ghost is not considered Philip Roth's best book – far from it. But it does offer us a powerful portrait of a relationship between two Jews with vastly different twentieth-century experiences: the seventy-five-year-old European Holocaust survivor, Amy Bellette, and the seventy-one-year-old American Jewish writer, Nathan Zuckerman. In this contemporary *Vollendungsroman*, the concern shifts from exuberant faith in free imagination (a commitment to the art of fiction that led Roth to bring Anne Frank back to

¹⁵ Hereafter abbreviated EG and cited parenthetically in the text.

life in *The Ghost Writer*), to a consideration of the ways that biographical and cultural criticism were encroaching, at a distance of years, on the legacy of Nathan's dead literary mentor and Amy's former lover, E.I. Lonoff. In this sense, *Exit Ghost* registers Roth's fear about the ways that others would usurp his own voice after his death. Without the youthful image of Anne Frank legitimating and mediating his desire for both filial acceptance and literary fame, and with his body and mind in decline, Nathan reflects on the end of his career as a writer. At seventy-one, Nathan's literary ambition is no longer constrained by the Holocaust. He has achieved the literary freedom he longed for in *The Ghost Writer*, only to come up against physical and cognitive constraints against whose power even his outsized imagination will prove impotent.

Exit Ghost marks an important departure for Roth. First, where the middle-aged Zuckerman had been displaced from the center of novels like *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000) so that the author could focus on the lives of others, in *Exit Ghost*, Zuckerman returns to the forefront of the narrative. Second, and more importantly, from the apoplectic *Our Gang* (1971), a political satire about Richard Nixon, to the writer consumed with post-war American history in the novels of the 1990s, Roth's novels responded with passion to contemporary events. But the contemporary events discussed in the *Exit Ghost* – the attacks of 9/11 and the reelection of George Bush – no longer interest the aging Zuckerman, nor do the proliferation of the communication technologies that, in his mind, have eradicated all forms of meaningful communication. Instead, he is drawn primarily to the personal and to representations of historical memory: to the figure of Amy Bellette, the aging survivor. His concern is human finitude, and the thought that imagination cannot undo it: he

realizes that Amy Bellette has been enslaved by the force of her “terrible story” whose “dimensions no mind could rewrite and no imagination undo and whose memory event the tumor wouldn’t displace until it had killed her” (EG 188). It seems that only in late life is Nathan in a position to register the enduring pain of the Holocaust.

With age, the novel’s two central characters come together by means of their shared past: Amy remains devoted to her dead lover, E.I. Lonoff, the writer who played an important role in *The Ghost Writer*; Nathan, having extricated himself from the present, lives in seclusion, reading the masters for the “last time.” In this sense, Matthew Shipe is right to characterize the novel as a “masterful and ultimately unsettling portrait of an artist who finds himself at the end of his life painfully alienated from his own culture” (193). Where *The Ghost Writer* opens with Nathan’s desire to write a *Bildungsroman*, *Exit Ghost* focuses on a writer engaged in the production of his own last work. In an inverted echo of the first sentence from *The Ghost Writer*, Nathan, in *Exit Ghost*, is both the character within a last work (the last of the Zuckerman series) and a writer within that work struggling with the fact that he has produced his own last work.

At the start of the novel, after a ten-year hiatus from city life, an impotent and incontinent Nathan returns to New York, hoping that a new medical procedure will enable him to better control his unruly prostate. While at the hospital, Nathan recognizes the seventy-five-year-old Amy Bellette, the survivor he has not seen in almost fifty years, despite the fact that her face and head have been disfigured as a result of complicated brain surgery to remove a tumor. Amy, like Nathan, has crossed the shadow line into the country reserved for the aging and the ill, a move that allows him to reflect on his lost youth and his impending death. America, he now discovers after many years living in

seclusion, is “No Country for Old Men,” a reference to Yeats’s poem that circulates within the novel.

This chance encounter with Amy at the hospital leads the reclusive Nathan to seek out an apartment in the city and to haunt the places that he used to frequent as a young man. Yet despite Amy’s important role within the novel, and the connection between her own failing health and the aging legacy of the Holocaust, few critics have focused specifically on the place of the Holocaust within the novel. Instead, much critical attention has been directed towards the role of contemporary US history (i.e. the attacks of 9/11 and Bush’s reelection), and the tension between the aging Zuckerman and the young Kliman, a tension that highlights Roth’s ongoing interest in the boundaries between fiction and autobiography.¹⁶ In her writing on these issues, Aimee Pozorski focuses on the role of trauma within the novel, both in the attacks of 9/11, and the actions carried out as a response. Pozorski describes Nathan as a man in mourning: a man who

¹⁶ Critics have examined at length the relationship between biography and fiction in *Exit Ghost*. See Velichka Ivanova, “Pursuing the Ghost of Personal History,” in *Philip Roth Studies* 5.2 (2009), 155-162; and Stian Stang Christiansen, “Zuckerman versus Kliman: Boundaries between Life and Literature in the Zuckerman and novels” in *Philip Roth Studies* 5.2 (2009), 219-225. These critics align the tension between fiction and biography with the battle between the aging Nathan Zuckerman and the young literary predator, Richard Kliman. In a recent study, Ross Posnock offers the following account of the relation between biography and fiction in Roth’s work:

Because he deliberately blurs the line between art and life, Roth is often accused of encouraging readers to abolish aesthetic distance and confuse him with his characters. Actually, his aim is more complicated – he imperils the boundary to expose how permeable it is and always has been. Reality and artifice routinely interpenetrate in the presentation of self in everyday life, as Erasmus, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Erving Goffman, Henry James, and other keen social analysts have been telling us for centuries. To grasp our inherent theatricality is valuable to the extent that it sparks critical scrutiny of the inveterate American reflex to look through artifice to the (alleged) real, as if the two are neatly separable and antithetical. Roth, in short, seeks to challenge the cherished and abiding myth of the natural. This inquiry, which extends to a number of our unexamined certitudes, is initiated in *The Counterlife*, culminates in *The Human Stain*, and defines one of the central concerns of his late fiction. (19-20)

has lost loved ones and those “abstract ideals” such as the “freedom and democracy he once believed in to be the founding principles of the United States” (“Mourning” 156).¹⁷

Moreover, critics have correctly read *Exit Ghost* as an inquiry into the labor of last books and late style more generally. From explicit references to Strauss’s *Four Last Songs*, to the epigraph from Dylan Thomas, to the reflections on Keats’s posthumous existence, to the references to Conrad’s late novel *The Shadow Line*, to the role that T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* plays in the novel, and to the vivid depictions of Hemingway at the end of his life, the novel explicitly engages with the tradition of late works and conceptions of late style.¹⁸ As Matthew Shipe says, the novel can be “read as an extended meditation on the implications of ‘lateness’ as both an artistic condition and a distinctive style” (193). Using Edward Said’s understanding of late style, Shipe reads *Exit Ghost* as an “oblique protest novel that mourns the America that emerged in the wake of Bush’s re-election” (199). For Shipe, the central tension in the novel surrounds Nathan exilic position vis-à-vis the present. My reading, by contrast, looks past the ways that the novel foregrounds the interface between the aging Nathan and present day New York, and the role of late style more generally, to focus instead on the ways that Nathan’s alienation becomes the precondition of his reunion with Amy, and the shared concerns that link these two Jews with antithetical twentieth century biographies.

¹⁷ Pozorski argues that Roth’s later novels “grapple more comprehensively with US history in their fascination with America’s ‘traumatic beginnings’ and the legacy of the American revolution” (“Roth and Trauma” x). Drawing on close readings of selected passages from Roth’s novels, and using the insights of American trauma theorists, she focuses on “the unexpected and repeated appearance of historical trauma that links the still-unfinished American Dream with the nightmarish quality of our recent history” (x). In this way, she joins forces with critics like Ross Posnock, who seek to situate Roth outside the tight confines of his regionalism.

¹⁸ For an interesting assessment of Roth’s use of Conrad’s *The Shadow Line* see Claudia Franziska Brühwiler, “Chiastic Reflections: Rash Moments in the Life of Zuckerman,” in *Philip Roth Studies* 5.2 (2009), 227-239.

In his *Bildung* of the first Zuckerman novel, Nathan used Anne to negotiate and respond to his parents' generation's fears and anxieties about their status as Americans; in the *Volledungsroman*, he assumes responsibility for the woman whose "terrible story" he shamelessly fabricated as a young writer. Together in *Exit Ghost*, they share a fear, not merely of their own mortality, but of the disappearance of their memories from their own minds and, in turn, from the world. This union reprises in the harsh light of old age Nathan's transformation of Amy into Anne Frank in *The Ghost Writer*. Disengaged from the present, Nathan turns away from postwar history and the demands of the present to focus on the characters and events from *The Ghost Writer*, layering and accreting them into the body of his last work. While the two septuagenarians may no longer have a future to look forward to, they share, and find refuge in, their memories of the past. The desire to invent flamboyant fictions, the hallmark of the *Bildungsroman*, has been replaced by the desire to reminisce, and to return to a world in which one's loved ones were still alive – a world in which one could still look forward to an as-yet-unrealized future. With Amy, Nathan forgets the present in order to temporarily seek solace in their shared memories of the past. The constraints of old age do not help to mediate the "vast discrepancy" between their various legacies, but they do bring an aging survivor and a second generation American Jewish writer into intimate contact, united by intensely personal memories that mean little to anyone else (Searles 159). The full transition from the *Bildungsroman* of *The Ghost Writer* to the *Vollendungsroman* of *Exit Ghost* is itself an object lesson in the historical and gerontological issues at stake in Roth's fictional reckoning with the Holocaust.

Amy's "terrible" First Avenue apartment, the venue for the unlikely reunion between these two aging figures, is populated by what she describes as "ghosts witnessing the end of the literary era" (EG 186). As if in some kind of European ghetto, Amy's dilapidated New York apartment, ravaged by time and haunted by ghosts, offers Nathan and Amy temporary respite from a world in which they no longer feel at home. Filled with relics from Lonoff's study, Nathan feels himself to be in the presence of the long-dead writer:

Off to the side I saw another relic from his study, the large, dull brown horsehair easy chair, molded over the decades to the counter of his substantial torso – and, it seemed to me, to the imprint of his thought and the shape of his stoicism – the same timeworn chair from which he'd first intimated me with the simplest questions about my youthful pursuits. (EG 169)

In a room filled with "timeworn" objects, we are given a last glimpse of two worlds on the verge of extinction.¹⁹ After showing Nathan her collection of shoes that once belonged to Lonoff, Amy asks him to keep a pair: "I wouldn't be giving them up," she says. "I'd be passing them on. If I should die of this tumor, I don't want everything to be lost" (EG 179). Now that he is confronted with the aging, vulnerable store of memory, Zuckerman's imperative to remember and to transmit that memory has displaced his

¹⁹ The presence of such objects lead Nathan to feels as though Lonoff's ghost has entered the room. To make sense of the situation he invokes the famous lines from Eliot's "Little Gidding." He imagines himself in the role of Elliot's poet, who, walking the streets before dawn is startled by the "compound ghost" (a role played by Lonoff's ghost in this case). The ghost goes on to list the 'gifts reserved for age,' which focus on the suffering, both psychological and physical, that accompany the onset of late life. Nathan, unable to remember the painful prophecy, has already begun to receive the gifts, which include the pain and shame associated with "motives late revealed" (Eliot II.140). For an account of the connection between Roth's novel and Eliot's poem see Eric Sundquist, "Philip Roth's Holocaust," in *The Hopkins Review* 5.2 (2012), 226-256. Print.

earlier need to fictionalize and make historical conjectures. While the words issue from Amy's mouth, the fear links Nathan's concerns about the end of his own career as a writer with Amy's more general concerns about the ways that the Lonoff's legacy will be distorted by young literary critics. Moreover, these fears about a world in which "everything would be lost," look back to her status as a member of the shrinking generation of Holocaust survivors, and to the prospect of a world without witnesses. Nathan's effort to ensure that "everything is not lost" leads him to memorialize his earlier works and the characters and events they contained. This return, I argue, looks back to Primo Levi's late life return to and reflections on his own first work, *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947). In his conceptions of old age, memory loss, and generational distance, Primo Levi becomes the crucial figure in understanding both the motivations and the limitations of Nathan and Amy's alliance. This is not to say that Levi exactly takes over the position occupied by Anne/Amy in *The Ghost Writer*. Instead, Levi's last work, which is cited directly at the start of the novel's third chapter, can help to us to understand the labor of last works more generally. And it is towards that struggle, and Levi's place in the novel, that I now want to turn.

IV

To make sense of Lonoff's struggle to produce a novel in his mid-fifties, Amy turns not to the work of an American fiction writer, but to Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), which similarly looks back on the collective events that defined his life from a distance of almost forty years. The textual connection between Roth and Levi,

however, extends beyond the pages of *Exit Ghost*. Levi, for example, plays a role in *Operation Shylock*, a novel that shuttles furiously between America and Israel. In an interview conducted by Roth with Aharon Appelfeld, which is quoted at length in that novel, the American writer asks the survivor what it would mean if he had chosen “not to fictionalize this material but to present your experiences as you remember them, to write a survivor’s tale as direct, say, as Primo Levi’s depiction of his Auschwitz incarceration?” (“Operation” 85). Refusing to remain caught in what Appelfeld refers to as the “mighty grip of memory,” Roth describes Levi’s fidelity to memory as a form of enslavement (“Operation” 86). Later, Roth’s fictional double tells the “real” Roth to stop reading Appelfeld’s novel, *Tzili*, because Aharon will never abandon the “stereotype of the Jewish victim” (181). After making this claim, Philip Roth’s fictional double goes on to say: “I read your dialogue with Primo Levi last year in the Times. I heard you had a breakdown after he killed himself” (181). These references point toward the chasm between Levi’s fidelity to memory (and the historical facts) and Roth’s preoccupation with the production of counter lives and counter histories. Yet, despite the fact that Levi fidelity to memory is regarded as a form of enslavement, his last work is invoked within *Exit Ghost* as a means to make sense of Lonoff’s struggle to produce his own last work.²⁰

At the start of the third chapter of *Exit Ghost*, Bellette attempts to explain to Zuckerman what killed Lonoff, her former lover, more than forty years earlier. Lonoff,

²⁰ A few years after their meeting in 1986, Roth would refer to Levi in the last chapter of *Patrimony*, as the survivor whose tattoo had the greatest impact on him. In that novel, Roth interprets the actions of a survivor friend of his father’s, Walter Herrmann, through the lens of Levi’s first work, *Survival in Auschwitz*. Walter arrives at a Roth family meal hoping to solicit Philip’s help with the publication of his pornographic wartime memoir. In exchange for Roth’s help, he offers him a discount on a fur coat. To make sense of Walter’s “Jewish mischief,” Roth invokes a chapter from *Survival in Auschwitz* in which Levi discusses the forbidden “bartering and bargaining” that took place among the prisoners in Auschwitz. Roth wonders: “Could not Walter, as a young man, have been among the most brazen of those Auschwitz traders, or was the capitalist zeal something he’d picked up when he got to America?” (219). In this instance, Levi becomes Roth’s preferred guide to the Holocaust.

she tells him, died while at work on what was to be his first full-length novel. After a career crafting the elliptical short stories esteemed for their compression and clarity, Lonoff spent his last years trying to master the form of the novel: “Before, he’d try to see how much he could leave out. Now it was how much he could put in. He saw his laconic style as a barrier, and yet he hated what he was doing instead” (Exit 194). To make sense of Lonoff’s late life struggle to master the new form, Amy takes Levi’s last work as a point of comparison. “If the leukemia hadn’t killed him [Lonoff], the novel would have,” Amy tells Nathan. When he asks “why?” Amy offers the following response:

The subject. When Primo Levi killed himself everyone said it was because of his having been an inmate at Auschwitz. I thought it was because of his writing about Auschwitz, the labor of the last book, contemplating that horror with all that clarity. Getting up every morning to write that book would have killed anyone. (EG 151)

After drawing the comparison, Nathan intervenes to tell readers that “she was speaking of Levi’s *The Drowned and the Saved*” (151). While cancer got to Lonoff before the labor of the last work, Amy believes that the labor of his last work would have killed him. Roth himself offered a similar explanation for Levi’s suicide in 1987. In opposition to the consensus opinion that Levi’s suicide could be backdated to Auschwitz, Roth suggested that Levi’s death was an effect of his decision to return to the subject in *The Drowned and the Saved*. He described the work, which he taught in classes on Holocaust literature, as “a masterpiece of grief, and of thinking about grief, and to think of him thinking about this every day...” (qtd. in Pierpont Roth 165). For Roth, Levi’s suicide was not the result of having passed through Auschwitz, but rather, an effect of writing about those terrible

memories in his later years. Amy, then, appears to ventriloquize Roth's position on Levi's death, attributing his suicide to the experience of writing about "that horror with all that clarity." While these last works deal with very different subject matter – Levi's reflects on the impact of time on memory, while Lonoff's revolves around an alleged incestuous relation – both works center on painful late life revelations.

But the reference to Levi's last work establishes important points of contact between the labors of not just two, but rather three, last works. In *Exit Ghost*, recognizing his cognitive faculties fading – as signaled by his inability to produce and sustain a coherent narrative – Nathan is forced to confront the end of his own career as a writer: "Nothing is certain any longer," he says, reflecting on the completion of his most recent work, "except that this will likely be my last attempt to persist in groping for words to combine into sentences and paragraphs of a book" (EG 159). At the end of the novel, with his body and mind porous and his very existence in a state of decay, Nathan exits the novel in the last lines suggesting, as Eric Sundquist points out, that he too has "been destroyed by the labor of writing" his own last work (254). For Nathan, as for Levi, the act of writing was inextricably linked to the act of living, and the end of one's writing life was tantamount to death. Lonoff's last work, then, looks backwards to the labor of Levi's last work, and forwards to the effects that writing *Exit Ghost* will have on Nathan.

They are united, however, by a shared desire to protect Lonoff's literary legacy against the threat posed by the young Richard Kliman, who seeks to publish a revisionist biography that will expose the sexual indiscretion from Lonoff's past. Their union thus entwines two sets of concerns: the aged writer's fears about the ways that his work and legacy will be distorted after his death, and the survivor's concern about the ways that the

legacy of the Holocaust was sliding towards simplification and stereotype. And this constellation of last works — Roth's, Levi's, Zuckerman's, Lonoff's, in this careful and deliberate alignment — show how these concerns about inevitable loss can be intertwined, each informing the other.

Exit Ghost is concerned with the ways that a legacy will be appropriated by others, a younger generation, seeking to make names for themselves. This is to say that Nathan, Roth, Lonoff, and Levi are now each of them, or will soon be, in the place occupied by Anne Frank in *The Ghost Writer*. Even Nathan, better positioned to do so than anyone, is simply too old to actively defend Lonoff's legacy against Kliman's appropriation. One might say that the labor of the last work, then, consists of the pain of bearing witness to a process that one no longer has the power to arrest, a process that resonates powerfully with Levi's project in *The Drowned and the Saved*.

V

As we have seen, in his last book, Levi is interested both in the Lager experience and in the ways that, with time, those experiences were being distorted and misinterpreted. It was not only that young Germans were eager to forget; aging survivors were experiencing memory loss and were themselves being influenced by subsequent representations of the atrocities. Over the course of the last work, Levi focuses on the “gap that exists and grows wider every year between things as they were ‘down there’ and things as they are represented by the current imagination fed by approximative books, films and myths” (DS 157). Concerned with the ways that the memory of the

Holocaust was sliding “fatally toward simplification and stereotype,” he sought to erect a dike (DS 157). At the start of his last book, Levi identifies a new enemy:

Nevertheless, even under normal conditions a slow degradation is at work, an obfuscation of outlines, a so to speak psychological oblivion, which few memories resist. Doubtless one may discern here the great power of nature, the same that degrades order into youth, youth into old age, and extinguishes life in death. (DS 24)

For a man in his late sixties, such forces were not the subjects of theoretical speculation. Rather, they now threatened to render him and the events that he spent his life bearing witness to unrecognizable.

By 1986 Levi, like the Zuckerman we meet at the start of *Exit Ghost*, felt himself to be painfully out of touch with the world. Many of the Germans he hoped to effect with his testimony remained willfully ignorant, and the Bitburg affair in 1985 left him reeling at the general insensitivity towards the victims. To make matters worse, Levi watched as a culture of commodified remembrance was being consolidated in the US. Within the academy, the Holocaust was being invoked and absorbed into critical debates where it was shaping ideas about representation and ethics in the postwar period. Identity politics, and the experience of vicarious victimhood, came together with the work of critics who were patrolling the borders of fiction, in search of any ethical missteps. Alongside these trends, Holocaust deniers in Europe and the Middle East were finding new platforms from which to vent their claims. The events that had so powerfully defined his generation, Alvin Rosenfeld reminds us, were being turned into a repository of lessons

about “man’s inhumanity to man, a metaphor for victimization in general, a rhetoric for partisan politics, [or] a cinematic backdrop for domestic melodrama” (“End” 11).

Levi does not see himself as immune to these changes. At the start of *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi issues an apology that could have easily issued from the mouth of Nathan in *Exit Ghost*: “An apology is in order,” says Levi. “This very book is drenched in memory; what’s more, a distant memory. Thus it draws from a suspect source and must be protected against itself” (DS 34). The voice is Levi’s, but the concerns unite the community of “no-longers” in *Exit Ghost* – a group that includes those American Jewish writers who came of age in the wake of World War II, and the last members of the community of Holocaust survivors.

Nathan describes the Jewish American writers who came of age during the Holocaust as the “no-longers”: aging writers in the process of “losing faculties, losing control, shamefully disposed from themselves...experiencing the organic rebellion staged by the body against the elderly” (EG 256-7). Nathan contrasts the “no-longers” with the “not-yets,” members of the young generation that includes the young and virile Richard Kliman, who, Nathan tells us, believes that “his heart, his knees, his cerebrum, his prostate...his everything is indestructible and that he, and he alone, is not in the hands of his cells” (Exit 256). The novel eulogizes this generation of “no-longers,” and draws attention to the ways that they have been transformed with age. Consider the following passage from *Exit Ghost* that reflects on the diminished state of these former literary titans:

Mailer is no longer in quest of a quarrel and can barely walk. Amy is no longer beautiful or in possession of all of her brain. I no longer have the

totality of my mental functions or my virility or my continence. George Plimpton is no longer alive. E.I. Lonoff no longer has his great secret, if such a secret there ever was. All of us are now ‘no-longers’... (EG 256)

The “no-longers” have all died or been transformed to the point where they no longer recognizable, and Roth’s efforts to mourn the passing of this generation, and their intense love of literature is an important feature of the novel. Charles Foran, in a short article on the novel, offers the following description of the generation being mourned:

For Nathan Zuckerman, it is a variety of New World Jew, and the accompanying literary sensibility, that is dying out. Gone are the transgressors, charting in book after book the pilgrim’s progress of their own profane, outsized selves in volatile relation to a twentieth century America of equal size and, in a sense profanity. Liberated into the American world with the pathologies of the ghetto and the collective trauma of the Holocaust pulsing through their veins, these figures – Bellow’s Herzog and Humboldt, Roth’s Zuckerman and Mickey Sabbath – were anxious and searching, often morally unhinged. Appetites were more than monstrous; they were holes that could never be filled. Tragedies, personal and public, were inevitable, the falls precipitous. (65)

Roth, as one of the last survivors of this generation, feels a special sense of responsibility to bear witness to the passing of this generation of writers and their celebrated characters that have left such an indelible mark on the second half of the twentieth century.

Despite his own encroaching demise, Nathan continues to write, continues to do what he “clearly could no longer do” (EG 193). After filing fifteen pages of hotel

stationary with notes about his time with Amy in her dilapidated apartment, Nathan experiences worry, like Levi, extending from his own memory loss to the more general theme of distortion and misinterpretation. Nathan wonders,

which of these stories she had told Kliman and how, full of his own intentions, he would transform them, garble them, distort them, misinterpret and misunderstand them, wondering what could be done to deliver her from him before he made use of her to turn everything into a sham and a shambles. I wondered which of these stories she had herself transformed, garbled, distorted, misinterpreted, and misunderstood. (EG 194)

Nathan's fear about memory loss leads him to a more general set of reflections on the ways that Kliman, driven by his own desire for literary celebrity, would transform the information passed on to him by Amy – information that Amy herself may have already unwittingly distorted. Amy's unwilling distortion of the past becomes entangled with Kliman's active desire to distort the past for his own gain. Despite their different intentions, however, the results are the same: the degradation of the powerful immanence of personal memory. Of course, it might be easy to forget, considering the force of Nathan's disdain for Kliman's youthful ambition, that Nathan, too, had served as a biographer for a number of important characters: Seymour Levov in *American Pastoral*, Ira Ringold in *I Married a Communist* and Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain*, and, to a certain extent, George Plimpton in *Exit Ghost*.²¹ However, where Kliman seeks to reduce Lonoff's fiction to a set of biographical facts, a move, he thinks, that will "redeem

²¹ In his great novels from the 1990s, Roth moved "beyond the narrow psychosexual concerns that his work had previously fixated on and turned outwards (and backward) to consider America's transformation during the postwar era" (Shipe 191).

Lonoff's reputation as a writer by ruining it as a man," Nathan – and his creator – locate these biographies squarely under the sign of fiction (EG 101). In this way, the battle between Kliman and Nathan is not over the use value of biography – Roth is not categorically opposed to the genre – but rather a struggle over where to draw the boundary between biography and fiction. Where Nathan – and his creator – sees literature as an admixture of autobiography and fiction, Kliman wants to distill the complexity of a work of art into a set of irrefutable facts about the author's life, focusing on an incestuous relationship between the young Lonoff and his half-sister. This disagreement, which cuts along intergenerational lines, looks back to both Henry Roth's impact on the novel and to the tension that separated Nathan and his parents in *The Ghost Writer*.²²

Nathan goes on to link his own inability to offset this slide, to protect Amy's memories of Lonoff against such misinterpretation and distortion, with the kind of powerlessness that defined Amy's wartime experiences. Recognizing his own inability to protect Amy and her memories of Lonoff, Nathan reflects on a role that he can no longer play: "I had reached the end of my protectiveness as well," Nathan says at the end of the novel: "and had known as much when I ceased being able to protect myself other than by disappearing. I couldn't stop that kid, even by taking Amy back to the Berkshires or posting a guard at her door" (EG 275). While he might be unable to protect her, he does have the ability to reflect on her "genuine biography," the biography that he replaced with his own "legendary biography" in *The Ghost Writer*.

Over the course of the third chapter, Nathan listens to Amy's account of her escape from the Quislings in Norway, of the death of her mother, father and oldest

²² Like the fictional Lonoff, Henry Roth also had an incestuous affair with a sister when he was young. And like Lonoff, Henry Roth, after suffering from writer's block for much of his career, experienced a late surge in productivity.

brother, and her circuitous journey to New York. A story so terrible, Nathan tells us, that it “never ceases to arouse, along with rage, incredulity” in the listener, the same incredulity that worries Levi at the start of *The Drowned and the Saved* (EG 189).

Nathan, like Levi, recognized the extent to which the enormity of the crimes would make it easier for future generation to believe that they had been invented. In this way, Nathan comes to see Amy’s inability to fictionalize this material, her inability to free herself from the prison house of memory, as an equal and opposite force to his own, earlier ability to create counter lives and counter histories, to transform the past for his own literary needs. In other words, Nathan sees his own commitment to fiction and Levi’s fidelity to memory as two sides of the same coin.

Yet despite the weakening of Nathan’s fictional capacities, he recognizes that her genuine biography is “factually contiguous” with the young Anne Frank. Nathan explains: “Transforming herself out of what I’d transformed her into did not permit erasing the fate by which her family had been no less besieged than the Franks” (EG 188). With age, it seems, Nathan recognizes the continuity of suffering that engulfed all those who came of age on that “doomed continent.” The late life union with Amy is made possible not because of what he has done *to* or *for* her – that belongs to the novel of youth – but because of what time has begun to do to them both. This leads Nathan to shift his attention from the efforts to create fiction – a vocation made increasingly difficult with the onset of late life – to the need to defend the borders of literature, to protect the people and works of art that have powerfully impacted his life. But how, exactly, does Roth’s novel defend those borders?

He does so, I want to suggest, through a recasting of Levi's gray zone. As we saw in the last chapter, Levi turns to the gray zone as a means by which to communicate with his young readers, who, at a distance of years, were transforming the complex and disorienting universe of the camps into a Manichean narrative involving Nazi monsters and innocent victims. Levi turned to the gray zone, a zone of ambiguity and complicity not to suggest that the victims and persecutors were interchangeable, but rather to create an image of the camps that could not be easily assimilated, an image that confuses and temporarily prevents the need for moral clarity and order that Levi identifies in his young readers. In this way, the gray zone for Levi was as strategic – as pedagogical – as it was descriptive.

Where Levi worries about the ways that Holocaust memory was being simplified and distorted by his young readers, Nathan worries about the ways that the young Kliman will reduce Lonoff's works of art into set of biographical facts, a fear that anticipates Roth's concerns regarding the end of the literary era. These fears are brought home to Nathan during a visit to Amy's apartment in which he discovers a letter written to the editor of the *New York Times*. The letter, which Amy says that Lonoff's ghost dictated to her, was a response to an article about a writer who went to Michigan seeking to track down the real life models for Hemingway's Upper Peninsula stories. Within the context of the novel, the letter voices an important argument against the reduction of literature to a set of phony ethical issues that threaten to simplify the complex universe of a work of art. The letter, which looks back to the deep-seated inter-generational quarrel between Nathan and Kliman, argues against the ideological simplifications and biographical reduction associated with the Hemingway article. Nathan and Amy are engaged in a

similar struggle, vying to keep Lonoff's last work free from any kind of biographical condescension. Nathan's defense of the autonomy of fiction, a defense that aims to protect the aesthetic against the encroachment of ethical concerns and criticism, takes its cue from Levi's description of the gray zone. In Roth's late novel, the gray zone is recast as the zone of fiction itself. The gray zone, which blurs the boundaries that we use to orient ourselves morally, is aligned with literature's destabilization of the claims of moral, ethical, or political considerations. In this way, Roth aims to defend literature against both the too-easy ethical clarity and the biographical criticism associated with members of the young generation.

While the young Kliman, of course, wants to use one of these dead writers for his own gain, the novel succeeds in bringing them together within the temporary dwelling of Amy's dilapidated New York apartment so that we might get one last look at two groups of Jews that are now bound together by their shared condition as living "ghosts" witnessing what Amy describes as the "end of the literary era" (EG 186). Michael Rothberg argues that Roth has been obsessed with the "unbridgeable distance between the Holocaust and American life – and the inauthenticity of most attempts to lessen that distance" (53). In *Exit Ghost*, we are compelled to see that Roth absorbs Levi's late voice and the labor of his last work into a late novel that self-consciously layers and accretes a number of late voices and aging artists, creating a kind of literary memorial for two eras on the verge of extinction: the American writers of Roth's generation who came of age in the shadow of the Holocaust – a generation of which Roth is one of the last living voices – and the shrinking community of European Holocaust survivors.

To deal with the threat of discontinuity that attends late life, Roth, who was in his mid seventies when the novel was published, attempts to put himself and his own work in perspective in *Exit Ghost* – to situate himself in the tradition of great art that unites writers across time. This effort, Ruth Setton suggests, is an important part of the novel’s late strategy (Royal 24). By entering the canon, by situating himself among those writers who have already been admitted, Roth’s late novel attempts to ensure a form of survival for both himself and Levi, two figures brought together by the labor of their respective last works – works, I have argued, that so actively reckon with the prospect of a coming world without witnesses. Roth’s work is a rueful acknowledgement of the aging and death of those survivors and writers who founded the Holocaust discourses of the mid-twentieth century. It provides an important alternative to the theory of testimony, and it points to an important alternative to the wholesale efforts to record and store Holocaust survivor testimonies. Like Levi, Roth reflects on the limits of testimony at the end of his own life. Roth’s novel actively enfoldes voices of the aging survivors, giving them a venue in which they can voice their protest at the passage of time, while acknowledging their loss cannot be stopped.

And this brings us to the novel’s title. In interviews, Roth attributes the title to a stage direction from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* that signals the departure of Banquo’s ghost – a departure that temporarily alleviates Macbeth’s ailing mind. In the context of the novel, however, the title refers to the departure of all those ghosts whose aging bodies and minds the novel self-consciously gathers in. The list includes: Nathan’s exit at the end of the novel; the departure of Roth, Mailer, and the rest of the generation of American male writers who came of age during the war; and also the departure of Primo

Levi, Amy Bellette, and the rest of the “era of the witnesses.” By departing, Roth spares us from having to witness the terrible content of their last hours. He keeps the death off-stage, refusing to reveal how a character with as much desire and vitality as Nathan Zuckerman could be transformed into a shell of his former self. By exiting the stage in this way we are reminded that these ghosts are just waiting to be remembered. In this way, the novel entwines the act of reading with the act of remembering, an entanglement dramatized by the union between Nathan the writer and Amy the survivor. What these figures share, finally, is a commitment to the act of reading fiction, a discipline that teaches one how to revivify the ghosts through the active imagination. And it is perhaps not surprising, then, that Primo Levi, in the last decade of his own life, began to focus increasingly on writing fiction. Like Lonoff, who wrote his own first novel at the end of his life, Levi, too, produced what he would describe as his first novel only five years before his death.²³

These shared concerns return us to the connection between Roth and Levi that had formed over a few days in 1986. When they embraced for the last time, both men were reportedly tearful, and apparently Levi said to Roth: “I don’t know which one of us is the older brother, and which is the younger brother” (Thomson 480). With *Exit Ghost*, the differences between generations that had worried Levi give way to an inevitably shared condition of agedness. While Roth may not be able to protect Levi’s legacy anymore than he can protect his own, *Exit Ghost* suggests that Roth’s entry into the canon will mean that Levi’s late voice will endure as well – a fitting tribute to a survivor whose life and work has had such a powerful impact on his own.

²³ In 1982, Levi published what he referred to as his first novel, *If Not Now When?*

Toward the end of the novel, Roth writes a scene that recalls another important literary survivor. Nathan, calling himself an “exhausted escapee...from the coarse-grained world, eviscerated by impotence and in the worst state of his life,” reflects on an argument he had with Kliman. After having spurned Kliman’s attempts to illicit information about Lonoff, the aspiring young writer vents his rage at the older, established author: “You’re dying, old man, you’ll soon be dead! You smell of decay!” he calls out in a crowded section of central park (EG 268). These lines hearken back to an important scene from Saul Bellow’s *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970), a novel focalized by an anti-sentimental Holocaust survivor, who, in his seventies, feels similarly alienated from 1960s New York. While delivering a public lecture on H.G. Wells at Columbia University, an argumentative young student in the audience challenges Sammler. The student has heard enough from this old world intellectual and aging gentleman who speaks with pedantic quotations from the Western canon. From the young student’s perspective, Sammler is a ridiculous figure, a pathetic remnant from a world on the verge of extinction. Yet Sammler’s refusal to give up on reason after Auschwitz links him to the figure of the aging Levi, and his specific brand of alienation looks ahead to Nathan’s predicament in *Exit Ghost*.

Roth’s novel gathers these aging and anachronistic voices together within the shelter provided by the work itself, creating a refuge for these late representatives. Roth’s post-Holocaust *Vollendungsroman* absorbs Bellow’s literary survivor who, along with Amy Bellette and Levi, share an intimate knowledge of what man is capable of doing to man. In his own post-Holocaust *Vollendungsromane*, Saul Bellow, whose work I consider in the next chapter, uses the backward-looking action of the life review, and the social

and cultural alienation that attends late life, as a means by which to register and affirm the vast distance separating American and European Jews and their respective memories of atrocity. Bellow insists on these differences, which only become apparent to him in late life, as a means to keep the Holocaust present to him. With that in mind I want to turn to Bellow and his 1989 *Vollendungsroman*, *The Bellarosa Connection*.

CHAPTER THREE

The End of the Line:

The Life Review and Holocaust Memory in Saul Bellow's *The Bellarosa Connection*

The older you grow the worse the discoveries you make about yourself.
-Saul Bellow¹

The dawning of what happened to the Jews of Europe came slowly. A number of years afterward, I had a remarkable letter from Saul Bellow explaining how in the forties he was so preoccupied with the pursuit of his career that he could pay no attention to anything beyond it. The realization, he said, came late.
-Cynthia Ozick²

In 1984, after reading Raymond Rosenthal's beautiful translation of Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table*, Saul Bellow called it his "book of the year" and wrote a strongly supportive and unsolicited blurb which he sent to Schocken Books, the publisher. The blurb calls Levi's hybrid autobiography "wonderfully pure," "beautifully translated," a work that is "necessary to read," and one in which there "is nothing superfluous" (qtd. in Thomson 445). His endorsement, along with favorable reviews by John Gross (*New York Times*), Neal Ascherson (*New York Review of Books*), and Alvin Rosenfeld (*New York Times Book Review*), propelled *The Periodic Table* onto American best-seller lists and helped generate American interest in Levi and his work.³

¹ Saul Bellow, *Ravelstein* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 159.

² Ozick, Cynthia. Interview by Paul Morton. *Bookslut*. Dec. 2008. Web. 13 May 2013.

³ For an account of Levi's reception in America see Michael Rothberg and Jonathan Druker's "A Secular Alternative: Primo Levi's Place in American Holocaust Discourse," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 28.1 (2009), 104-125. Additionally, all of Levi's major biographers reflect at considerable length on the rise of Levi's popularity in America during the mid-1980s. See Carol Angier, *The Double Bond, Primo Levi: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002); Ian Thomson, *Primo Levi: A*

When he described *The Periodic Table* as “wonderfully pure” and “essential,” Bellow was helping to fashion Levi’s image as a special kind of Holocaust writer, one whose cool, direct prose was free of the emotionality and moral outrage more typical of Holocaust survivor discourse. Unlike Elie Wiesel, the most famous survivor in America, whose prose seethes with urgency and despair, both moral and religious, Levi, who was a chemist by training, wrote about the events with the precision and clarity of a detached observer. Yet despite Bellow’s praise for Levi’s work, when the two authors actually crossed paths, the American writer seemed to have little time or patience for the European survivor.

At the Kenneth B. Smilen Book Awards in New York City in 1985, Levi received a cash prize of \$1,500 for *The Periodic Table*. Bellow was also in attendance, the recipient of his own award. Levi, aware of the significance of the endorsement and grateful for it, anticipated meeting the American Nobel Laureate. Bellow, however, with what Irene Williams recalled as a “frosty smile,” snubbed Levi and hurried on to talk to other guests (Thompson 475). Although Bellow’s biographers make no mention of this interaction, all of Levi’s biographers treat it an important moment in his trip to America in 1985, and one that he did not forget.

Bellow, for his part, in the novella *The Bellarosa Connection* (1989) appears to fictionalize this interaction, or failure to interact, narrating an unconsummated meeting between a European survivor, Harry Fonstein, and his American benefactor, Billy Rose. Levi’s biographer, Ian Thomson cites a single, telling line from Bellow’s novella that apparently comments upon both failed encounters: “One man’s gratitude is poison to his

Life (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002); and Myriam Anissimov, *Primo Levi: Tragedy of an Optimist* (London: Aurum Press, 1998).

benefactor” (475). Why was Levi’s gratitude poisonous for Bellow? And what might Bellow’s thematizing of a refusal to meet tell us about the American writer’s late life understanding of the Holocaust?

In this chapter, I turn to a letter that Bellow wrote to Cynthia Ozick in 1987, reading it in parallel with *The Bellarosa Connection*, to connect Bellow’s thematizing of the refusal of personal acknowledgement to his statements about the collective failure of Jewish American writers to sufficiently reckon with the Holocaust. The letter and the novella, I argue, written from the perspective of old age, engage in the backward looking action of the life review, which provides a special vantage point from which to reflect on Jewish American responses to Holocaust. In the letter, Bellow writes that Levi was one of the few Jewish writers who was able to “comprehend it all,” referring to the Holocaust, and thus unlike his American counterparts (“Letters” 439). They, consumed with “making it” in America, he suggests, have created works that aestheticize brutality without inquiring into its origins, and that romanticize isolated acts of resistance without acknowledging the massive political and social forces that rendered such resistance futile. Bellow describes his evasion of these forces as an effect of his preoccupation with literature and the demands of art. In the novella, he examines the extent to which Hollywood and Broadway present specious accounts of history and individual agency, which keep American audiences absorbed in the present and cut off from any serious engagement with history.⁴ Only with age do these engines of American innocence and puerility become legible to Bellow and his aging narrator.

⁴ Where *The Bellarosa Connection* uses a late life revelation to wrench the aging narrator out of his American condition, *Ravelstein* (1999), Bellow’s last novel, pits Chick’s innocence, and literary disposition, against Ravelstein’s reflective engagement with history. For a full account of the role that old age plays in *Ravelstein* see Helen Small, *The Long Life* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 89-119.

The Bellarosa Connection bears witness to Elie Wiesel's claim that the Holocaust is inaccessible to those who did not experience it directly. This is not to say that Bellow's novella mystifies or sanctifies the Holocaust; rather, he attempts to protect the Holocaust from the ways that it was fading from memory through assimilation and dramatization within the American imagination. Alan Berger, who points towards Wiesel's impact on the novella, claims that this "novella is about little else than the difficulty of remembering the Holocaust in America" (326). My argument, by contrast, suggests that the novella is not *about* the difficulty of remembering the Holocaust in America, but that it reflects on the impossibility of remembering the Holocaust *because* of America. In the process, Bellow resists the fading of memory over time by keeping his attention focused on the differences between European and American Jewish memories of atrocity. Where Philip Roth uses the universal constraints of old age to foster a literary community between an American writer and a European survivor, and to give shelter to ghosts of Holocaust writers real and imagined within his novel, Bellow uses old age, and the work of the life-review in order to expose the distance between the unnamed American narrator and the European survivor, a distance that prevents the Holocaust from being assimilated within American culture.

I

Yet the *The Bellarosa Connection* was not Bellow's first novel to use the vantage point of late life in order to reflect on the Holocaust. Bellow's 1970 *Vollendungsroman*, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, helps to establish how and why late life is uniquely suited to the

Holocaust reckoning in *The Bellarosa Connection*, while also deviating in important ways from the later novella. In the earlier novel, an aging European survivor struggles to come to terms with his individual and collective past, and, not surprisingly, the two works have often been read as “companion pieces.”⁶

In *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* the septuagenarian survivor functions as an avatar for twentieth-century history. Sammler has lived long enough to absorb the liberal fantasies and utopian hopes associated with the work of H.G. Wells, while experiencing first-hand the terror of being a Jew in wartime Poland. Moreover, he has lived long enough to experience contemporary American urban decay in 1960s New York. These experiences have transformed him into what Alvin Rosenfeld describes as “a prototype of the Holocaust writer,” a “one-eyed” seer who is “possessed of a double knowledge: cursed into knowing how perverse the human being can be to create such barbarism and blessed by knowing how strong he can be to survive it” (“Double Dying” 32). As a highly Westernized survivor, Sammler is “wise but sad, so full of Western civilization that he can hardly think without quoting,” a figure not so unlike Levi himself (Parini 67). Sammler’s age and experience allow him to recognize the unsettling points of contact

⁶ See Paule Levy, “Black Holes Versus ‘Connections’: Conflicting Visions of the Holocaust in Bellow’s *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* and *The Bellarosa Connection*,” *Reclaiming Memory: American Representations of the Holocaust* (Finland: University of Turku, 1997), 131; and Regine Rosenthal, “Memory and the Holocaust: *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* and *The Bellarosa Connection*,” in *Saul Bellow at Seventy-Five: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Gerhard Bach (Germany: Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 1991), 91. In *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* the Holocaust is not depicted as a specifically Jewish tragedy. Instead, by avoiding historical specificity, the event achieves a universal significance. In this vein, Kurt Dittmar argues that the Holocaust takes on a symbolic significance as the event that signals the end of the enlightenment project. See Kurt Dittmar “The End of Enlightenment: Bellow’s Universal View of the Holocaust,” in *Saul Bellow at Seventy-Five: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Gerhard Bach (Germany: Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 1991), 63-80.

between his European past and the American present, forms of continuity that upset many readers.⁷

Yet where the septuagenarian Sammler has seen too much of the “real world,” the septuagenarian American narrator in *The Bellarosa Connection* realizes, in the wake of a late life revelation, that he has seen too little. And where Sammler struggles to recover from his past, the unnamed narrator of *The Bellarosa Connection* realizes, in late life, that his life in America has rendered him unfit to reckon with the experiences that shaped the lives of European Jews. Where Sammler’s age allows him to hold together “the horror of the Holocaust and the diversions of modern American life,” the unnamed narrator of *The Bellarosa Connection* experiences old age as a period that forces him to acknowledge the differences between American and European Jewish experiences – differences, I’ll argue, that keep the Holocaust powerfully present within the novella (Rosen 685).⁸

Moreover, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* places a Holocaust survivor and his near death experiences at the hands of the Nazis in Poland at the heart of the novel. Having survived a mass shooting that claimed the life of his wife, Sammler manages to escape from the pit, and goes on to survive the war. This novel, which some have called Bellow’s finest, would go on to win the National Book Award in 1971. Significantly, in the world of *The Bellarosa Connection*, Sammler, and survivors of his ilk, can no longer speak. If their voices are to be preserved, it will be up to the figure of the aging American narrator; the

⁷ The association between Eastern European communism and urban decay in America is powerfully dramatized in Bellow’s 1982 novel, *The Dean’s December* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), a work often associated with the start of his conservative turn.

⁸ In a wonderful short essay, Jonathan Rosen describes Bellow’s project in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* as follows: “Bellow has reversed the conventional pattern of modern Jewish literature; he hasn’t secularized religious forms, he has transformed a secular modernist formulation back into a religious one. One might almost say that the ‘ghetto traditions’ of Agnon have come calling on Western literary traditions” (685). My argument about *The Bellarosa Connection* moves in a similar direction.

very present survivor who focalized the earlier novel becomes a kind of absent center in the later novella.

Comprehending the significance of the shift in strategy between these novels requires some understanding of the important historical changes that took place between the publication of *Mr. Sammler's Planet* in 1970 and *The Bellarosa Connection* in 1989, for it was during this period that the Holocaust moved from the margin to the center of American Jewish culture. This movement, which Peter Novick's landmark study *The Holocaust in American Life* describes in terms of the emergence of the Holocaust as the "consensual symbol" unifying American Jewish identity, arguably reached its apogee in 1993—what some in the media called the "Year of the Holocaust"—with the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the release of Steven Spielberg's popular film, *Schindler's List*.¹⁰

The growing attention paid to the Holocaust in the 1970s and 1980s resulting in what Alvin Rosenfeld famously called the "Americanization of the Holocaust," was due in large part to the important roles occupied by Jews in the American media.¹¹ Jews, Novick writes, were not

just the 'people of the book,' but the people of the Hollywood film and the television miniseries, of the magazine article and the newspaper column, of the comic book and the academic symposium. When a high level of concern with the

¹⁰ In this process, the Holocaust became for many the default symbol for evil in our time. This discursive trend enabled, and even encouraged, individuals and groups with very different histories to deploy Holocaust references often in strange and unsettling contexts. In the next chapter, I consider how J.M. Coetzee's Post-Apartheid novel *Disgrace* deploys Holocaust tropes and references within a South African context.

¹¹ See Alvin Rosenfeld, "The Americanization of the Holocaust," *Commentary* 6.1 (1995). Rosenfeld mentions Spielberg's film, which places a European benefactor – not a Holocaust victim – at the center, and the design and location of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as important aspects of the Americanization process. See also Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (New York: Verso 2003).

Holocaust became widespread in American Jewry, it was, given the important role that Jews play in American media and opinion-making elites, not only natural, but also virtually inevitable that it would spread throughout the culture at large.

(12)

American Jews, remarkable for their socioeconomic success, helped proliferate coverage of the Holocaust in mainstream media, precisely at the moment when their cultural distance from their European counterparts would come into its sharpest focus. The Holocaust came to inspire its own liturgy and provide a basis for moral instruction—and a unifying anxiety—during a period in American Jewish history that was marked by the decline of faith, the abatement of persecution, and the fragmentation of the Jewish community.

These changes have led some to describe the emergence of a form of Holocaust Judaism, one based on identification with the victims and the collective effort to preserve the memory of that event within Jewish history. Holocaust Judaism, which places genocide rather than the Exodus from Egypt as its originary event, has come to present a significant challenge to Jewish religion as the basis of Jewish identity, and although the collapse of Jewish identity into Holocaust remembrance brings with it certain risks of mystification and sanctification, it has become an important feature of after-Auschwitz thought. A tradition of vigorous debate and collective self-questioning that stretches back to the Yavnean rabbis has been, in many quarters, replaced by an acutely defensive Jewish self-awareness, founded on an understanding of the Jewish past as an ongoing

experience of persecution and victimization.¹² The widely-noted rightward turn in American Jewish political life—largely in response to real and imagined challenges to Israel’s security, especially after the Six Day War of 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973 —forms one of the most consequential outcomes of this broader cultural shift.¹³ Bellow’s own relationship to neo-conservatism, discussed elsewhere, is an effect of this generation-defining transformation in American Jewish life.¹⁴

Works of historical scholarship written during this period began to question the role played by the American government and American Jews during the Holocaust. In 1984, David Wyman published *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945*, a work that exposed America’s failure to save European Jews, despite knowledge of the widespread extermination policies as early as 1942. Wyman’s book shed new light on the policies and practices that prevented American intervention: the persistent force of anti-Semitism within the State Department; the consistent rejection of appeals to bomb the Auschwitz gas chambers and railroads; and the ineffectiveness of Jewish leadership, including religious figures like Rabbi Stephen Wise, to mobilize public support for European Jewry. While important works by other historians explored

¹² The Yavnean rabbis were those who gathered in Yavneh after the destruction of the second temple in 70 C.E. This gathering would result in the codification of the Mishnah approximately one hundred years later. The Mishnah, says Shaye Cohen, was unlike any previous Jewish work

because no previous Jewish work, neither biblical nor post-biblical, neither Hebrew nor Greek, neither Palestinian nor diasporan, attributes conflicting legal and exegetical opinions to named individuals who, in spite of their differences, belong to the same fraternity. The dominant ethic here is not exclusivity but elasticity. The goal was not triumph over other sects but the elimination of the need for sectarianism itself. (29)

For an account of Yavneh and its significance see Shaye Cohen’s *The Significance of Yavneh and Other Essays in Jewish Hellenism* (Frankfurt: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

¹³ Bellow explored the anxiety surrounding a second genocide in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970), a work written in the aftermath of the six-day war in 1967. To better understand Bellow’s relationship to Israel see *To Jerusalem and Back* (Penguin: New York, 1998).

¹⁴ For a brief introduction to the impact of neoconservative thought on Bellow’s politics see James Atlas’s biography of Bellow, *Bellow: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2000); and the essays collected in *A Political Companion to Saul Bellow*, eds. Gloria L. Cronin and Lee Trepanier (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2013).

these issues prior to 1984, Wyman's book brought them to a wider public at a time when the Holocaust was becoming a central reference point for American Jews.¹⁵ The guilt associated with the earlier failure to respond to the genocide only intensified efforts to memorialize the event within present-day America. In advocacy for American military or humanitarian interventions, references to the Holocaust have become almost *de rigueur*. In *The Bellarosa Connection*, as we will see, Wyman's historical argument is ventriloquized through the voice of Billy Rose, the character whose Hollywood-style rescue operation saved Jews from Nazi occupied Europe.

Moreover, the 1980s was a decade when increasing concern was being paid to survivor testimony. This attention was driven, at least in part, by growing concerns about the aging and death of the community of Holocaust survivors. During this decade, major institutions began the international task of recording and storing survivor testimonies, beginning with the establishment of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University in 1979. Since then, a number of large institutions, both in America and Israel, have worked tirelessly to track down and record survivor testimonies from around the world.¹⁶

But survivors, of course, were not the only ones growing old. So, too, was the generation of Jewish American writers who came of age during the war – one of whom was Saul Bellow, who turned seventy in 1985. For Bellow, the move from age as a theoretical condition to a lived experience had an important impact on his life and work.

¹⁵ See Arthur Morse, *While Six Million Died* (New York: Secker & Warburg, 1968); and Henry Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1970). A number of other articles and monographs were produced on the same subject during this period.

¹⁶ In the 1990s, Steven Spielberg established the USC Shoah Foundation and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum created the International Database of Oral History Testimonies. The latter provides access to at least 115,000 testimonies worldwide.

In interviews from the late 1980s onwards, Bellow began to address his decision to avoid the Holocaust in his earlier works. In an interview with Jonathan Rosen from 1991, Bellow says that while writing *The Adventures of Augie March* in Paris during the 1950s that he actively “shut out” the stories of the survivors. As a Yiddish speaker, surrounded by survivors and refugees in Paris, he would have been an able recorder of those testimonies. Yet as a writer working to complete his great American novel, he knew that that the novel, in order to succeed, could not contain such grief. Rosen explains Bellow’s omission as follows: “If he had incorporated the stories of those survivors, he could not have written *Augie March*, his breakthrough book; he could not have become the writer he wanted to be” (qtd. in Rosen 684). Only by ignoring those stories could Bellow create the novel he described in the interview with Rosen as his “American seven-layer cake” (qtd. in Rosen 684).

Evasion has played an important role within American literature. In *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1966), Leslie Fielder famously argues that a strategy of evasion forms the dominant mode of America’s great books, as protagonists flee adult responsibilities and seek refuge in nature and childhood. Bellow, cognizant of the evasion constitutive of America’s great works, could not afford to be weighted down by the past. While Bellow’s *Bildungsroman* is animated by Yiddish tones, and informed by the domestic world and speech patterns of Bellow’s orthodox youth, its central character refuses to be interpolated by adulthood with the same intensity that his creator avoided contact with the Holocaust. To engage with the Holocaust would have only limited his sense of autonomy and freedom, forces required for the production of complex fiction. For the young Bellow the choice was clear.

During the mid 1980s, Bellow, now in his seventies, became actively engaged in the work of the life review—a process that would impact his life as well as his work. In *Safe at Last in the Middle Years*, Margaret Morganroth Gullette describes Bellow's great novels of midlife—*Henderson the Rain King* (1959), *Herzog* (1964), and *Humbolt's Gift* (1975)—as midlife *Bildungsromane*, in which middle-aged protagonists, after years of confusion, finally experience “minutes of comprehension, or anticipated comprehension” (142). Challenging the idea that it is “too late to change”—the most frequent cliché of decline narratives—these midlife *Bildungsromane* held out the promise of change and development well into middle age. “Nobody,” says Gullette referring to Bellow, has “given the beginning better press” (143).¹⁷

By the late 1980s, however, the forward-looking enthusiasm and frenetic energy that link Augie March, the hero of Bellow's great American *Bildungsroman*, to middle-age protagonists like Herzog and Henderson, had been replaced with a series of aging narrators fixated on memories of the past, and engaged in the work of the “life review.” These aging narrators, enjoying privilege and prominence in American culture, become preoccupied by painful events from their past, and struggle to determine if or how those events will undermine their public legacy. The strategies of evasion, which allowed his young protagonist to look away from painful features of adult life, fail his older protagonists, for whom grappling with the burdens of the past, associated with the action of the life review, has become the central business of late life. Moreover, what unites

¹⁷ According to Frank McConnell, this expansiveness and capacity for self-invention which links Augie March to the midlife protagonists, is one of the “great achievement of American fiction generally in the postwar period” (102). Where Gullette focuses primarily on the situation of the midlife characters in Bellow's novels, McConnell sees such expansiveness to be less a property of individual characters and more an effect of Bellow's narrative form, which McConnell describes as his “fiction's openness to the widest range of philosophical, historical, and political debate, and in the openness of each single fiction to further development and debate in subsequent tales” (102).

these late stories, as S. Lillian Kremer makes clear, is a respect for the importance of collective memory: “In the Bellovian universe,” says Kremer, “the rejection of memory is a source of moral decay...and enlightened embrace of memory is a source of spiritual and moral growth” (329). The existential stakes of old age are high, but the powers of memory, which old age intensifies, offer to characters their last chance to return to the Jewish fold.

These late changes, however, are not only fundamental to the novels’ plots. They occasion stylistic and generic shifts in Bellow’s work, as well. The transition from the genre of the *Bildungsroman* to the *Vollendungsroman* was accompanied by a new appeal to economy. In the preface to *Something to Remember Me By* (1991), a collection of three short works published in 1991, Bellow describes the onset of a Chekhovian “mania for shortness”: a desire for compression, clarity and specificity that, he says, makes it hard for him to read his earlier novels. “It’s difficult for me now to read those early novels, not because they lack interest but because I find myself editing them, slimming down my sentences and cutting whole paragraphs” (v). The process of self-revision associated with the life-review extends to his relationship with his earlier novels. This late-life desire to edit and clarify his earlier novels is reflected in the works themselves. However, where two of the stories in the collection – “A Theft” and “Something to Remember Me By” – focus on narrators consumed with personal events from their respective pasts, *The Bellarosa Connection* (originally published in 1989 but included in this collection), is the

only story explicitly interested in interplay between the life review and the memory of the Holocaust in American life.¹⁸

Finally, through the work of the life review, Bellow, increasingly dependent on memories from the past, began to confront the events and people he had systematically evaded as a young writer. In “The Jewish Writer in America,” a speech initially delivered by Bellow in 1988 and published in the *New York Review of Books* in 2011, Bellow reflects on the extent to which the confrontation with the Holocaust in latter life made his earlier, literary concerns seem largely trivial by comparison. In the speech, Bellow invokes Yeats’ poem, “Why Should Old Men Be Mad,” to distinguish between the personal tragedies that anger the old men in the poem, and the experience of growing old in the shadow of the Holocaust: “Yes, private tragedies – one should not minimize them,” Bellow says: “But put them up against the project of murdering an ancient people in its entirety, think of what it means that your Jewish birth may condemn you to death, and they seem negligible causes of madness” (“Jewish Writer – II”). Indeed, Bellow goes on to describe himself in that speech as a figure who, in late life, finds himself on the cusp of madness: “And I sometimes glimpse in myself, an elderly Jew, a certain craziness or extremism, as if the vessel can no longer hold what is poured into it, and I feel that my mental boundaries are crumbling” (“Jewish Writer – II”).

For Bellow, then, late life has less to do with the cognitive and physical decline commonly associated with old age, and more to do with the way that collective history intrudes and disrupts the work of the individual life review. For aging Jews at the end of the twentieth century, the life review can not be simply autobiographical or individual in

¹⁸ The action of the life review is an important feature of Bellow’s short fiction from the 1960s. See “The Old System” and “Mosby’s Memoirs” in *Mosby’s Memoirs and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1996). See also the other two stories collected in *Something to Remember Me By* (New York: Viking, 1991).

scope. Instead, Bellow shows us the extent to which the life review is a historically and geopolitically conditioned process; one that forces aging American Jews to reflect on the pre-American and non-English Jewish past. Remarkably, this intrusion of Jewish history in late life affects even upwardly mobile American Jews like Bellow, whose lives were not directly affected by major historical upheavals, who identify with America, and who have largely abandoned Jewish religious traditions. In this way, the work of the life review presents a clear and direct challenge to the process of assimilation – a process that links Bellow’s anxiety in *The Bellarosa Connection* to the anxiety that animates Primo Levi’s last work, *The Drowned and the Saved*. While they might not share a solution, they do reflect on the same problem.

This brings us back to the important differences between *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* and *The Bellarosa Connection*. Ruth Miller, Bellow’s first biographer, draws attention to the fact that Bellow’s Sammler was the act of a young writer inventing an old character, whereas he was speaking from experience when he sat down to write *The Bellarosa Connection* in 1989. Miller explains:

When Bellow created Artur Sammler, published in 1970, it was, as he said, an act of the imagination, a fanciful projection, to see how all his world, and his experiences in his world, would look to a man in his seventies. Almost twenty years later, Bellow has become a man in his seventies and the narrator of this story looks back to see how all that has happened to him, all that he has seen and done, looks to him at the present time. (327)

Miller reads *The Bellarosa Connection* as a “reprise of his career as a writer,” a work, similar to Levi’s last work, that looks back on and evaluates his earlier works from the

vantage point of late life. Where the theoretical possibility of late life and mortality yields a survivor like Sammler and a highly cerebral novel like *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, the felt necessity of late life and mortality leads to a novella in which we are left not with images or voices from those traumatic experiences, but rather with a irreconcilable chasm between the experiences that shaped the lives of the survivors and the experiences of American Jews. Indeed, where Sammler found a way to “combine American insouciance and dark European tragic awareness,” the aging narrator of *The Bellarosa Connection*, through the action of the life review, comes to recognize his inability to combine those forces (Rosen 684). And where Sammler sees America through the eyes of a European survivor, the other narrator sees Europe through an American lens. After a late-life revelation, however, he comes to see the contrast between these two very different ways of seeing. Understanding that revelatory process, its relation to late life, and its consequences for the continuation of Jewish life in America is the focus of the novella – a novella that actively reflects not on the Holocaust as a historical event, but on the impact that the fading of the Holocaust from memory will have on the future of Judaism in America. With this mind, I want to turn to the letter that Bellow wrote to Cynthia Ozick in 1987, and to the place that Levi occupies in that letter.

II

While the occasion for his letter is Ozick's novella, *The Messiah of Stockholm* (1987), Bellow's larger concern is the responsibility of the Jewish writer to history, and to the Holocaust especially. The letter opens with a compact self-portrait of the artist as

an old man: an isolated curmudgeon no longer capable of “real-life communications.” After a brief apology for his slow response to Ozick’s last letter, Bellow refers to himself as a “loner troubled by longings, incapable of finding a suitable language and despairing at the impossibility of composing messages in a playable key – as if,” he goes on to say, “I no longer understood the codes used by estimable people who wanted to hear from me and would have so much to reply if only the impediments were taken away” (“Letters” 437). At seventy-two, imprisoned by the “cranky idiom” of his books, he now speaks of himself as a “desperately odd somebody,” “an occult personality...who has, as a last resort, invented a technique of self-representation” (“Letters” 437-8). In “The Obedient Bellow,” a review of a collection of Bellow’s letters, Edward Mendelson cites these lines to illuminate the gap, apparently intensified with age, between what he calls Bellow’s “peacock’s display of words and the self that his words half concealed,” says Mendelson, “never stops wishing for a way to speak directly instead of performing” (“Obedient Bellow”). The same virtuosity that brought him fame as a writer has resulted in a barrier between him and those “estimable people” who still want to hear from him.

As a kind of consolation to himself for this bleak self-description, Bellow seeks to foster a sense of identification with Ozick, whose work he has long admired. While they may disagree on the Jewish question, “as Jewish discussants invariably do,” he refers to both Ozick and himself – apparently without irony – as the “real things” (“Letters” 438).¹⁹ Unlike the “dazzling virtuosi” like William Gaddis who generate applause and

¹⁹ In his review of *Bellow: The Collected Letters*, Mendelson explains that Bellow addressed people in his letters according to his understanding of their position in the chain of command:

To a Jewish friend or colleague, he writes from a superior height, either affectionately (“Remember you occupy one of the top compartments in my heart”) or contemptuously (“Coventry, pal, is not the place”). To any gentile whom he suspects, usually rightly, of anti-Semitism, he writes in Olympian disdain. But to a Pro Protestant who embodies “love, harmony and safety” – Robert Penn Warren, Ralph Ellison, John Cheever – he writes in courtly gratitude, as

esteem on the “literary concert-hall circuit,” the writers that Bellow describes as the “real things” apparently pursue a different goal. Bellow explains this distinction by way of an obscure reference: “Life may have been easier in the literary concert hall circuit, but Paganini wasn’t Jewish” (“Letters” 438).²⁰ While Ozick and he might have done well by following the likes of Paganini and Gaddis onto the “concert-hall circuit,” Bellow reasons that contemporary Jewish writers should beware the unrestrained virtuosity of language – the same virtuosity that has left him isolated and alienated from others. For the Jewish writer working in the shadow of the Holocaust, it seems, such virtuosity must be balanced by something else: a willingness to reckon with the historical forces and events of the twentieth century. This distinction between types of writers – the “real things” and the “virtuosi” – sets up Bellow’s reading of Ozick’s novella, *The Messiah of Stockholm*.

Bellow’s account of the novella responds to an earlier review by Robert Alter.²¹ Alter’s review, which was published in *Commentary* in 1987, focuses on the novella’s apparent failure to deal directly with the Holocaust. According to Alter, Ozick, for all her engagement with Judaism and Jewish history, elides the horror of the Holocaust by privileging “rhetorical intensity” over “experiential depth,” a move, he claims, that ultimately dramatizes “the power of literature to dominate reality, to displace it, to call into question reality’s seemingly self evident authority” (546).²² It is this power,

he does when he first writes to a future wife, though his tone to his wives changes afterward. (“Obedient Bellow”)

Bellow is certainly operating in an affectionate mode with Ozick. He seems less interested in speaking from a position of superiority than in reflecting on the costs of doing so.

²⁰ Paganini was a violin virtuoso of the 19th century.

²¹ According to James Atlas, Bellow decided to write back to Ozick after reading Alter’s review of her novella. See James Atlas, *Bellow: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2000). 546n.

²² This line of critique, which has been an important feature of contemporary literary criticism and theory, looks back to Adorno’s famous prohibition against the production of poetry after Auschwitz. In his reading of Adorno’s prohibition, Michel André Bernstein suggests that Adorno was primarily concerned with

according to Alter, that Ozick's novella celebrates through an orphan narrator who grants – to use Ozick's language – the rights of the imagination priority over the rights of history.²³ Alter makes his critique plain and literal in the last sentence of his review: "The absence of either Israel or a persuasive sense of real history is a symptom of the narrow limits of the merely literary notions within which her fiction is enacted."²⁴ While Bellow is far less critical when it come to Ozick's novella, he, too, addresses the extent to which "merely literary notions" override a sense of "real history."²⁵ For Bellow the problem is hardly confined to Ozick's novella: it is a key feature of Jewish American writing, and the problem around which the letter circles. In this way, to the extent that Bellow criticizes Ozick he also criticizes himself as a member of the same community of writers.

Like Alter, Bellow claims that Ozick relies too heavily on her "executive powers" and her "virtuosity." He describes Lars Andemening, the Swedish protagonist who imagines his father was the murdered Jewish writer Bruno Schultz, as "quixotic, deluded, fanatical," a figure, he says, "who lives on a borrowed Jewishness" ("Letters" 438).²⁶

literature's power "to transform anything, including the death camps, into an 'occasion' for the display of its potency" (144).

²³ See Cynthia Ozick, "The Rights of History and the Rights of Imagination," in *Commentary* 113 (1999), 22-27. By contrast, Sylvia Barack Fishman argues that Lars, by the end of the novel, grieves for the destruction of European Jewry. Fishman goes on to describe Ozick's novel as one that reveals the possible pitfalls of reducing humanity to either the imagination or bald reality. Fishman explains: "In the world of Ozick's works, both the worship of imagination and the abandonment of imagination can lead to destruction and the impoverishment of life" (92). According to Fishman, Ozick dramatizes the very sins that Alter accuses her of committing. However, my interest is not in the novel *per se*, but in Bellow's assessment of it.

²⁴ The only Jew in this otherwise gentile novel is the ghost of the Polish Jewish writer, Bruno Schultz, who was murdered by a German officer in the ghetto of Drohobycz in 1942.

²⁵ In a number of speeches and interviews from the late 1980s and early 1990s, Bellow reflects on his earlier preoccupation with "merely literary" matters, and the extent to which they kept him from reflecting on the Holocaust. In "A Jewish Writer in America," Bellow draws a sharp distinction between a set of literary and cultural concerns – what he refers to at the end of the first part of the talk as "merely social matters" – and the systematic destruction of European Jewry, which is the subject of the second half of the talk.

²⁶ Interestingly, it was Philip Roth who introduced Schultz's work to readers of English through two volumes of *Writers from the Other Europe*, a series that he edited for Penguin. Additionally, Ozick's novel is dedicated to Roth. The relation between Roth and Ozick's works is briefly explored in Alter's review.

Convinced of literature's power, Lars draws historical connections out of thin air. "Reality," says Lars, "is as thin as a piece of paper and is constantly showing its cracks." In his hands, Jewish history becomes a plaything for the imaginative excursions of a non-Jewish orphan in search of a past. Lars' over-identification with Schultz has everything to do with the Schultz's abilities as a writer and nothing to do with the historical forces that claimed his life. As for Lars, virtuosity and an unchecked faith in the imagination cut him off from everyone and everything around him: he abandons two marriages, no longer speaks to a young daughter, and has nothing to do with the other literary critics at the newspaper where he works. In his struggle to secure sole authority over Schultz's legacy – to remain his only son, as it were – Lars is transformed, according to Bellow, into a "mere literary pro" and "non-entity," a character ill equipped to confront the full force of historical violence that destroyed the life of Bruno Shultz.

Lars' problem, we might say, is not that he actively imagines a past for himself, which is something everyone does. Instead, it's that he allows his imagination of the past to become fixated on a singular person, a move associated with the kind of artistic idolatry that is a central theme in Ozick's work, and an essential feature of the letter, as well.²⁷

The distinction between the "real things" and the "literary virtuosi" takes on a new significance here. It does not suggest a division between writers who privilege the

²⁷ Despite her celebrated capacities as a storyteller, and her engagements with the Holocaust in her own fiction, Ozick expresses a deep suspicion about the fiction-making process. In a variety of essays, Ozick argues that storytelling, at least from the vantage point of traditional Judaism, threatens to transgress the Second Commandment ("Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image"). In her preface to *Bloodshed*, a collection of short stories, Ozick worries that fiction can become "a corridor to the corruptions and abominations of idol worship, of the adoration of the magical event"(11). These concerns are an important feature of her post-Holocaust *Vollendungsroman*, *The Shawl*, published in 1989. In that novel, which features an aging female Holocaust survivor, the shawl comes to stand in for the enduring force of her traumatic past in the same way that Schultz stands in for Lars' past.

autonomy of the imagination versus those whose testimonial works attempt to describe bald reality. Instead, the “real things” seem to be those writers whose work struggles to achieve a balance between these forces. Bellow’s search for this balance motivates his critique of Ozick’s novella and his subsequent claim that Jewish American writers failed to reckon with what “should have been for them the central event of their time, the destruction of European Jewry” (438).²⁸ It is not that these American Jewish writers failed to write about the Holocaust, and we can point to a novel like *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* as an example. Rather, it’s that they failed to write about the past in the right way, combining unflinching historical recognition with austere, but masterful, literary artistry. This is where Levi enters the letter as a counter-example to this “unspeakable evasion.” Bellow explains:

I can’t say how our responsibility can be assessed. We (I speak of Jews now and not merely of writers) should have reckoned more fully, more deeply with it.

Nobody in America seriously took this on and only a few Jews elsewhere (like Primo Levi) were able to comprehend it all. (438-9)²⁹

The distinction between Levi and the Jewish American writers, however, does not cut along experiential lines: Levi’s level of comprehension is not an effect of having survived a year in Auschwitz. Instead, his ability to comprehend has to do with the *way* he came to

²⁸ Bellow, of course, is certainly not the first one to address this issue. Since the late 1970s, literary critics have responded to what they perceive as the failure of American Jewish novelists to reckon with the Holocaust. Before the late 1970s, American Jewish novelists “mainly restricted themselves to the social and moral aspects of assimilation or alienation, while ignoring, deliberately avoiding, or in aesthetic terms transcending and consequently obscuring, the brutality of Jewish suffering in Europe” (Dittmar 63). When they did confront the Holocaust, the aesthetic force of their work overcame or mitigated the brutality they sought to represent.

²⁹ Ozick, the recipient of the letter, was no stranger to Levi’s work, and Bellow’s reference to the Italian survivor would not have gone unnoticed. As if responding to Bellow’s elevation of Levi within the letter, Ozick, less than a year later, would publish an inflammatory article criticizing Levi in *The New Republic*. In it, Ozick reads Levi’s last work as a suicide note in order to implode his mythic image as a benevolent, calm and forgiving survivor. I discuss the article at some length in chapter one.

write about the events over the course of his forty-year career.³⁰ But why, exactly, did Bellow choose Levi as the writer who succeeded where so many others failed? What did Levi get right? To answer this question, we need to consider not what Bellow says about Levi – which is minimal – but the way that he is used as a kind of foil to expose the failure of Jewish American writers to reckon with the Holocaust.

Bellow quickly turns his attention to his own failure as a young writer to sufficiently reckon with the Holocaust:

I was too busy becoming a novelist to take note of what was happening in the Forties. I was involved with “literature” and given over to preoccupations with art, with language, with my struggle on the American scene, with claims for recognition of my talent or, like my pals of the *Partisan Review*, with modernism, Marxism, New Criticism, with Eliot, Yeats, Proust, etc. – with anything except the terrible events in Poland. Growing slowly aware of this unspeakable evasion I didn’t even know how to admit it into my inner life. Not a particle of this can be denied. And can I really say – can anyone say – what was to be done, how this “thing” ought to have been met? (439)

Bellow is not talking about his failure to write *about* the Holocaust – he had already touched on the subject in *The Victim* (1947), and in a much more explicit manner in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*. Instead, he seems to recognize the extent to which his own obsession with “literature” and the demands of art, and his desire to be recognized as an artistic virtuoso, were so absorbing that they served to distract him from the “terrible events”

³⁰ Remarkably, after accusing Jewish American writers of failing to reckon with the Holocaust, Bellow goes on to say that writers had been “disfigured” by the same “forces of deformity that produced the Final Solution”: forces, Bellow says in his letter to Ozick, that deformed the “mental life of the century” and that left “no minds fit to comprehend” (439).

taking place in Poland. He does not displace blame onto literature – far from it. Rather, he condemns a particular use of literature akin to the one that drives the narrator in Ozick’s novella to cut himself off from everyone and everything around him, and that has left him, as a man in his seventies, feeling unable to communicate with those people who still want to hear from him. What he condemns, then, is the use of the literary imagination to fulfill wishes, and to liberate one from a sense of responsibility towards others, and, more specifically, from any sense of obligation for the reception and transmission of Jewish history or tradition.

In interviews and speeches from the late 1980s and early 1990s, Bellow develops a number of the same themes from the letter: the failure to reckon with the Holocaust as a young writer, his refusal to take seriously the fate of the Jews, and the writer’s struggle to write about traumatic historical events. In an important interview from 1990, he claims that he was simply too consumed with his life on the American scene to engage with history: “It is nevertheless quite extraordinary that I was still so absorbed by my American life that I couldn’t turn away from it. I wasn’t ready to think about history. I don’t know why. There it is” (“A Half Life” 276).

Later, in the same interview, Bellow singles out another European author, Marcel Proust, as the counter example, the writer who apparently succeeded where the young Bellow had failed. While Bellow’s choice of Proust may seem strange given the French writer’s reputation as a high modernist who largely disengaged from geopolitical reality, it does suggest that Bellow is looking for earlier examples of Jewish writers who figured out how to reckon with the historical events that defined their lives. Proust, or at least Bellow’s account of him, was the French writer who “accepted his assignment as a

historian of French life,” the writer who, unlike Bellow, managed to “combine the aesthetic question with the historical one” (“A Half Life” 277). Bellow identifies this balance as a major accomplishment:

Very few writers are able to keep the balance because they feel they have to create a special aesthetic condition for themselves which allows only as much present actuality as they can reconcile with their art. So Proust was not destroyed by the Dreyfus case and the war; he mastered them aesthetically. A great thing” (277).

Proust’s ability to balance the aesthetic with the historical presents a powerful challenge to American writers working in the shadow of Auschwitz, which Bellow failed to meet. Proust’s ability to “combine the aesthetic question with the historical one” resonates with Bellow’s description of Levi as a writer who was able to “comprehend it all” (277).

Unlike American writers for whom the rights of the imagination displaced the forces of history, Levi, like Proust, created an aesthetic condition that allowed him to “master” his experiences in Auschwitz. He managed to find a style that yoked testimonial force with literary grace and subtlety, a combination that made him a unique Holocaust writer and witness. Where other writers succumbed to hysteria in the wake of the Holocaust, Levi, says Alfred Kazin, managed to write about the most terrifying features of camp life without “being overwhelmed” (127).³¹ He possessed the kind of rare

³¹ Unlike so many of his peers, Levi remained a nineteenth century humanist after Auschwitz. In “The Humanist and the Holocaust,” David Denby describes Levi as a writer who “restored knightly luster to qualities we have regarded as inadequate and even pathetic, qualities we have nearly ironized out of existence – dignity, personal cultivation, even lowly patience” (33). Unlike modern writers who privilege irony and intensity, for whom fierceness and introspection were basic traits, Levi was something of an anachronism, a hold over from an earlier age, a writer whose humanism survived Auschwitz. Denby explains:

Here was a survivor, clearly an intellectual, who was innocent of theories about totalitarianism and Nazism, innocent of prophecy and despair. In this book, and in his later work, he was, of all things,

intelligence that “stares life in the face even in those moments of extreme emotion that crush the heart” (Kazin 127). Leon Wieseltier, as we saw in chapter one, describes Levi as a modern rationalist with “night vision”: a writer who “demanded of reason what Milton demanded of virtue, that it not be a youngling in the contemplation of evil” (“Introduction” xv). Within the letter, Bellow’s sense of isolation, which he links to his virtuosity, stands in sharp contrast to Levi’s direct and lucid prose, a writing style that places understanding and communication above all else. These European writers, then, managed to reckon with history in their fiction in ways that Jewish American writers did not, and it is precisely this gap that Bellow addresses in both the letter and, two years later, in *The Bellarosa Connection*.³²

III

In the same interview, Bellow declares that it was not until *The Bellarosa Connection* that he was finally able to confront the significance of the Holocaust and its legacy in America: “Somehow I managed to miss the significance of some very great events. I didn’t take hold of them as I now see that I might have done. Not until *The Bellarosa Connection*. So I have lived long enough to satisfy certain significant demands” (“Half a Life” 277). In the novella, he manages to “take hold” of the events in new ways; a change that could only be brought about at a distance of years, and that allowed him to

a kind of 19th-century humanist – the most ridiculed, the most despised, the most inadequate of all postwar intellectual types. (28)

Removed from current intellectual debates, and clinging to qualities that had been rendered obsolete, Levi stands within the canon of Holocaust writers as a unique voice and figure.

³² Bellow ends the letter by describing his current efforts to reckon with the events of the Holocaust. To do so, he turns his attention away from the active work of self-making, and from the American period of his life, to focus instead on becoming receptive to the event that “brings all Being into Judgment” (439). In the process, he must rid himself of a “certain amount of enlightenment,” a process that can only take place at night, he says, when rational censorship is inactive (“Letters” 439).

satisfy certain belated demands. In his mind, the novella represents an attempt to achieve something of the balance and the level of comprehension that he ascribes to writers like Levi and Proust, European writers powerfully consumed with memory and its discontents. Within Bellow's novella, old age is accompanied by the sense of isolation and alienation that Bellow describes in his letter to Ozick. And only in the wake of a late life revelation, does the narrator come to recognize the barrier between his personal memories, those cultivated in private, and the collective memories of European Jews whose lives had been so powerfully shaped by the Holocaust and its legacy. Only in old age, does he see just how much of that past he has failed to reckon with. With this in mind, I want to turn my attention the novella, and to the late life revelation that drives its plot.

As the founder of the Mnemosyne Institute in Philadelphia, the aging and unnamed narrator of *The Bellarosa Connection* amassed a fortune teaching professionals how to strengthen their abilities to remember. The American son of an immigrant father figured out how to market and monetize the long-standing Jewish art of receiving and transmitting the past. Now, in his seventies and with "the institute in the capable hands" of his son, the narrator is ready "to forget about remembering" (5). Yet despite his professional success, and his desire for a late-life change, he remains painfully attuned to the tight compact between memory and life: "...if you have worked in memory, which is life itself, there is no retirement except in death" (5). While there may be no escape from memory, he has certainly cut himself off from the figures and places associated with his immigrant past. Following a familiar Jewish immigrant arc, the narrator exchanged his Newark roots for a home in suburban Philadelphia and a Gentile wife. He spent his life avoiding "uncomfortable mixtures," avoiding the emotional entanglements with those

immigrant Jews he associates his family's Newark past. But, with late life, his relation to the past begins to change.

Having recently lost his wife, he now feels "stuck" within the "twenty empty rooms" of his Philadelphia home, "sick," he says, of the "unshared grandeur of this mansion" (65). Isolation seems to be an inevitable byproduct of his American success in much the same way that Bellow, at least in the letter, describes his sense of isolation as an effect of his reliance on literary language. Moreover, he feels increasingly drawn towards the "feelings and longings" that he associates with "emotional memory," a form of memory he had long since abandoned in favor of a more instrumental approach to memory (6). Like Bellow's compact portrait of the aging artist at the start of the letter, the septuagenarian narrator feels himself isolated and estranged from others, longing to connect with people from his past. In response to these feelings, he comes to ruminate on a married couple that he first met forty years ago and whom he has not seen in ten years: the Holocaust survivor, Harry Fonstein and his American wife, Sorella.

His father initially introduced him to Harry, hoping that an encounter with a tough European Jew would help his puerile American son to grow up: "He hoped it would straighten me out to hear what people had suffered in Europe, in the real world" (8). Yet while the son developed an affinity for both Harry and his impressive American wife, they remain peripheral to his own economic ascent in America, minor figures from his Newark past. At first, the narrator recounts with fondness his memories of Harry and Sorella, focusing specifically on Harry's escape from Europe, which was engineered by the underground network organized and funded by the Broadway producer, Billy Rose. The narrator focuses on Rose's refusal to meet with Harry after the war, a fact that only

intensifies the chasm separating European and American Jewish experience – a chasm that points back to Bellow’s refusal to meet with the Levi in 1985. Towards the end of the novella, he reveals that his earlier efforts to remember the Fonsteins had been a memory test, initiated as a response to fears regarding his own aging process and inevitable cognitive decline. The narrator explains:

So, too, my recollection of *Fonstein v. Rose* is in part a test of memory, and also a more general investigation of the same, for if you go back to the assertion that memory is life and forgetting death (“mercifully forgetting,” the commonest adverb linked by writers with the participle, reflecting the preponderance of the opinion that so much of life *is* despair), I have established at the very least that I am still able to keep up my struggle for existence (64).

His effort to remember the Fonsteins begins not out of a desire to understand the experiences that shaped Harry’s life in Europe, but rather, as a means by which to maintain his own struggle for existence. In this way, says P. Shiv Kumar, the narrator’s initial reflections on the Fonsteins, which precede his late-life revelation, reveals “more about himself than about the object of reflection” (34). However, in the wake of a dream, the narrator realizes the extent to which his memories of Harry’s have been distorted by his own American perspective. Recognizing this, he sets out to relocate the Fonsteins, hoping to reconnect to the man whose story he has never really understood.

Critics have tended to focus on how the narrator’s late life revelation changes his relationship to memory. For instance, S. Lillian Kremer describes the narrator’s transformation in terms of the shift from “historic amnesiac to advocate for the perpetuation of historic memory,” a transformation described by the majority of critics

(“Something” 340). While he may specialize in helping others to recall memories, he spends little time thinking about the meaning of Jewish history or memory. Only at the end of a long career “devoted to the mechanics of memory retention,” says Kremer, does the narrator discover that “he has been blind to the relevance of personal and collective memory” (“Memoir and History” 50). This blindness leads him to track down the Fonsteins. Allen Berger, who examines the novella through the lens of Jewish studies, argues that the “narrator concludes by embracing a ‘Jewish’ definition of memory” (325). While J.P. Steed, in an article that considers the role that humor plays in the novel emphasizes the narrator’s “movement towards Jewishness, toward collective memory, toward a sense of shared history” (40). This association of Jewishness and collective memory, affirmed in the novella’s last lines, looks back to the Hebrew Bible’s willingness to command memory.³³ In his invaluable study, *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Yosef Yerushalmi reminds us that the Hebrew verb *zachar* [to remember] “appears in its various declensions in the Bible no less than one hundred and sixty-nine times, usually with either Israel or God as the subject, for memory is incumbent upon both” (5). But where the Biblical imperative to remember called for a return to the Torah and its commandments, the novella sheds light on the modern chasm between the imperative to remember and the narrator’s inability to recognize what, from that collective past, is worthy of being remembered. This chasm only becomes apparent in the wake of an unsettling dream and subsequent revelation.

³³ Within the Biblical context, the imperative to remember extends to both the nation of Israel and God, a fact affirmed by the narrator in the closing sentences of Bellow’s novella:

Suppose I were to talk to him about the roots of memory in feeling – about the themes that collect and hold the memory; if I were to tell him what retention of the past really means. Things like: “If sleep is forgetting, forgetting is also sleep, and sleep is to consciousness what death is to life. So that the Jews ask even God to remember, ‘*Yiskor Elohim.*’ God doesn’t forget, but your prayers requests him particularly to remember your dead. But how was I to make an impression on a kid like this? (89)

In the dream, the septuagenarian narrator finds himself submerged in a hole from which he cannot escape. With his legs entangled in “ropes or roots,” and drained of all strength, he feels powerless to alter his condition: “I couldn’t call on myself, couldn’t meet the demand, couldn’t put out” (76). Passivity, not pain, colors the experience. At the lip of the pit, the narrator identifies the boots of the man who devised the scenario. After awakening, the narrator dismisses the seemingly obvious notion that it was an anxiety dream about his impending mortality, “the Grand masquerade of Mortality shriveling to a hole in the ground” (76). Instead, he interprets the scene as a form of communication, one that forces him to recognize a “lifelong mistake,” and his inability to respond to the demands of the present: “I couldn’t call on myself, couldn’t meet the demand, couldn’t put out” (76).

The mistake looks back to Bellow’s self-assessment in the letter as this late life revelation takes on a punitive character: Bellow is not just reflecting on the costs of being American – although he is doing that too – he is actively indicting himself for being the wrong kind of Jew: a Jew who spent his early life pursuing virtuosity as a writer in America. Bellow, like his aging narrator, discovers the mistake only in old age. Yet this mistake, as we will see, is also linked to the making of his American self: a creative process that depends on the systematic avoidance of the brutality, evil and death that shaped Harry’s wartime experiences. In this way, making or creating becomes the antithesis of a more receptive and open approach to the past, one that would have allowed him, as a younger writer in Paris, to receive the testimonies of the survivors living in his midst.

The dream exposes the defense mechanisms, erected over the course of a lifetime, that have enabled him to look away from what he calls the “ground base of brutality, without which no human music is ever performed” (78). Only at the end of his life does he reflect on the costs associated with the making of his American self:

Revelations in old age can shatter everything you’ve put in place from the beginning – all the wiliness of a lifetime of expertise and labor, interpreting and reinterpreting in patching your fortified delusions, the work of the swarm of your defensive shock troops, which will go on throwing up more perverse (or insane) barriers. All this is bypassed in a dream like this one. When you have one of these all you can do is bow to the inevitable conclusions. (76)

The dream and subsequent revelation exposes the “fortified delusions” and “barriers” erected in order to protect him from the recognition of brutality, murder, and evil. The experience forces him to recognize that he has failed to “grasp the real facts in the case of Fonstein” (78). The recognition of this failure, and his desire to understand and learn about the brutality that underwrote the Holocaust, drives him to track down Harry Fonstein and his wife.

Importantly, he aligns the creation of these “fortified delusions” and “barriers” with the impact that Hollywood, and the entertainment industry more generally, has had in its power to shape the American imagination of atrocity, emphasizing stories of heroism that can erase or diminish the realities of pain, suffering, and helplessness. As the narrator struggles to unpack the dream he is reminded of a comment that Sorella once made about Harry. In his orthopedic boot, she said, Harry would have been unable to

vault over walls and escape like the Jewish Hollywood star, Douglas Fairbanks. In the aftermath of the dream, her comment takes on new significance. The narrator explains:

In the movies, Douglas Fairbanks was always too much for his enemies. They couldn't hold him in. In *The Black Pirate* he disabled a sailing vessel all by himself. Holding a knife, he slid down the mainsail, slicing it in half. You couldn't have locked a man like that in a cattle car; he would have broken out. Sorella wasn't speaking of Douglas Fairbanks, nor did she refer to Fonstein only. Her remark was ultimately meant for me. Yes she was talking of me and also of Billy Rose. (77)

Only in the aftermath of the late-life revelation does the narrator realize that Sorella was not talking about Harry. Instead, she recognized that the narrator like Bellow and Billy Rose, the Broadway producer and notorious celebrity, shared a "New World version of reality," a way of interpreting reality indebted to the on screen antics of Hollywood heroes (76). Indeed, we can hear Bellow's name, too, in the name *Bellarosa*, the pronunciation of "Billy Rose" employed by the Italians who worked in Rose's underground network during the war. Bellow's virtuosity as a writer becomes entwined with Rose's relentless pursuit of sex and celebrity: both suggest a betrayal of the Jewish past and a refusal to remain engaged with the fate of the Jews. It is perhaps for this reason that the narrator remains nameless, the legacy of his earlier failure to reckon with the Holocaust, while monetizing the Jewish art of receiving and transmitting the past.

After the revelation, the narrator becomes aware of himself as a product of the New World, a world in which one's "strength doesn't give out," and there is no "cattle car" strong enough to send a man like Douglas Fairbanks passively to his death. By

contrast, European Jews like Harry had been shaped by an old world version of reality: one in which they “were trained in submission,” and in which one could not escape from the cattle cars heading to Auschwitz (77). In the American imagination, the hero’s imprisonment in the cattle car becomes an occasion for a daring and inevitably successful escape. And this “New World version of reality,” associated with Hollywood, overrides and obscures a deterministic world where trains, indifferent to the will of their occupants, lead directly to Auschwitz and mass death. The inescapable brutality associated with this deterministic world is replaced by a melodramatic world in which the hero’s isolated acts of resistance provide a form of specious suspense.

In the process, of course – and this is Bellow’s point – the massive political and social forces that rendered such resistance impossible are systematically removed from the American historical imagination. Hollywood, then, does not just dramatize the individual hero’s power over fate; it also creates a way of interpreting and assimilating the past that overlooks the pain and suffering experienced by those who experienced it: a way of seeing that blames the individual victim for failing to alter the course of his or her life. The narrator’s late life revelation forces him to recognize the connection between Hollywood’s imagination of atrocity and the construction of his American identity. A revelation, as we saw in chapter one, that Primo Levi experiences through his late-life encounters with young students.

Noting that the narrative is “colored” throughout by an “attitude of amusement,” P. Shiv Kumar goes on to say that the narrator’s interest in the Fonsteins “arises more from fascination than from serious concern” (34). This contrast applies, as Kumar points out, to the ways that the narrator receives Harry’s testimony as a young man. Despite the

terrifying material, the narrator received Harry's testimony in episodes, "like a Hollywood serial – the Saturday thriller, featuring Harry Fonstein and Billy Rose, or Bellarosa" (13). While the narrator's father hoped that Harry's account of his experiences in Europe would encourage his American son to grow up, the son ends up displacing and replacing Harry's testimony with an action adventure narrative starring Harry Fonstein and Billy Rose. This replacement, suggested by the novella's title, places Billy Rose or Bellarosa, as the Italians called him, at the center of the narrative. It was Billy who created the underground network that rescued Harry from a prison in Rome. In the process, Billy's heroic actions displace the brutality, evil, and loss of family that shaped Harry's experiences in Europe. Similarly, the cover of the first edition of the novella, published by Penguin in 1989, enacts a similar displacement. The cover features an oversized ticket to a show called *The Bellarosa Connection*, which is apparently playing at the historic Ziegfeld Theater in New York. The oversized ticket, which is already ripped, dwarfs a picture of the New York skyline. In this way, entry into the great American city is conflated with entry into the great American show, an association that helps to affirm Kumar's earlier claim.³⁴ In this fictional city, the power of the hero – not the suffering of the victim – takes center stage.

Importantly, this logic of displacement, which places the hero not the victim at the center of the action, extends to presence of two very different kinds of survivors within the novella. Towards the end, the narrator receives a call from a reform Rabbi from

³⁴ Kumar also discusses the significance of the cover image but along different lines. Where I focus on the depiction of America as giant stage, Kumar emphasizes the fact that the ticket itself has already been torn. Kumar explains: Harry "came to America like one with a torn ticket to the great show that America is (courtesy Penguin cover design); he could not enter the theater because he was a given a ticket that was torn. He remains an outsider in American even after forty there" (36). In my reading, the torn ticket says more about the force of the entertainment industry in America than it does about Harry's status as an outsider.

Jerusalem. The Rabbi, in search of Harry Fonstein, has called the narrator by mistake. He informs the narrator that he is calling on behalf of an old Holocaust survivor living in Jerusalem who claims to be Harry's uncle. However, the description of the Jerusalem-based survivor, who is in need of a benefactor, bears little resemblance to his American counterpart, Harry Fonstein. The Rabbi offers the following compact portrait of the old man:

This man is Polish by birth, and he is in a mental institution. He is a very difficult eccentric and lives in a world of fantasy. Much of the time he hallucinates. His habits are dirty – filthy, even. He's totally without resources and well known as a beggar and local character who makes prophetic speeches on the sidewalk. (60).

Where the survivor in Jerusalem remains “abused out of his head by persecution, loss, death, and brutal history,” Harry Fonstein, the survivor living in America, has been able to put his past behind him (61). This is due, at least according to Billy, to the fact that Harry was never interned in a death camp – the place described by Irving Howe as the “locale of what must be considered the essential Holocaust” (189). And Billy, who makes this point, uses the language of Hollywood to do so: “He [Harry] wasn't in Auschwitz. He got a major break. He wasn't tattooed with a number. They didn't put him to work cremating people that were gassed” (54). Harry's “major break” is tied to the fact that he avoided the death camps, a break made possible by Billy's intervention into history.

The other survivor, by contrast – and it is important that he is in Israel – remains a “decaying old man” still “ebullient and full of protest.” Where Harry could play opposite Billy in *The Bellarosa Connection*, the other survivor, who continued to vent his rage over the course of his life, would have no place in this action-adventure story (80). Where

one survivor has a place in this American novella, the other one does not, and, not surprisingly, the narrator's search for Harry displaces the Jerusalem-based survivor within the novella.

Only Sorella actively pushes back against this sanitized, melodramatic version of Holocaust. Acting as what Coral Fenster describes as a "Bellovian heroine," she seeks to expose the chasm between the American present and the European past.³⁵ Out of love for her husband, Sorella keeps her eyes trained on Jewish history and the fate of the Jews; she is the character who repeatedly brings "conversation back to Fonstein's rescue and the history of the Jews" (26). Where the narrator views assimilation as a way to shed the burden of the European past, Sorella points to the tight compact between assimilation and annihilation: "The Jews could survive everything that Europe threw at them," says Sorella: "I mean the lucky remnant. But now comes the test – America. Can they hold their ground, or will the U.S.A. be too much for them" (58). Only Sorella identifies the "daring parallel...between the destruction of Jewish life, signified by the Holocaust, and the modern threat to Jewish spiritual survival caused by complete assimilation into American society" (Levy 143).

Sorella appears to "provide a paradigmatic response to memory," and "her stance is in opposition to that of Billy Rose and to the narrator's pre-epiphanous life" (Berger 326). Yet while she may be present a sharp contrast to Billy, the character she opposes most forcefully is not Billy, but Hyman Swerdlow a relative of Harry's that the narrator calls during his search for the Fonsteins. Despite his first name, Hyman is described as "the perfect bureaucrat," a man shorn of all traces of Judaism. The narrator compares

³⁵ In Fenster's account, Sorella is the hero of the story; the one, he says, who has the "capacity to feel, to act, and to remember...[through her] Bellow has shown us how to be the most we can be – like Sorella" (27).

Hyman to his late father: “I had known old Swerdlow. His son had inherited an ancient Jewish face from him, dark and craggy. Hyman had discovered a way to drain the Jewish charge from it. What replaced it was a look of perfect dependability” (72).³⁶ Where Swerdlow has “severed himself from any ties to *Klal Yisrael*,” Sorella remains consumed with and committed to the study of the Holocaust (Berger 324). Yet, while she might keep her own eyes trained on the Jewish past, she apparently doesn’t transmit anything meaningful from that past to her son. When it comes to Gilbert, her only son, she longs for a future world in which he will be able to focus exclusively on mathematics; a world where persecution will no longer be the force unifying the Jewish community (57). But without the threat of persecution, and with no knowledge of the traditional sources, what kind of Jewish life will there be for Gilbert? To this question, Sorella, like everyone else in the novel, doesn’t seem to have an answer. The fact that her son ends up a professional gambler in trouble with the law suggests that Sorella’s brand of Holocaust consciousness might not have a future in America. In this way, she, too, emphasizes the importance of memory for largely personal reasons: she seeks to master the subject of the Holocaust not for the sake of Jewish continuity, but as a sign of love for her European husband. It was Harry after all, who saved her from an anonymous life as an unmarried French teacher in Newark.

Moreover, her approach to the Holocaust, while attuned to the tight compact between genocide and fantasy, is itself somewhat generic: “On our side of the Atlantic,” Sorella tells the narrator, “where we weren’t threatened, we have a special duty to come to terms with it” (54). While she never explains this “special duty,” her sense of

³⁶ Interestingly, the end of the assimilation process results in the a Jew who is now defined by a look of “perfect dependability.”

obligation appears to take physical form. Her obesity, which the narrator reflects on obsessively, is described as an effect of her willingness to absorb her husband's terrible history into the folds of her being. "Maybe Sorella was trying to incorporate in fatty tissue some portion of what he had lost – members of his family" (44). Her size allows her to function like a living Holocaust memorial within the novella: the only character that seeks to provide posthumous refuge, through her own physical expansion, for the memory of those Jews killed during the Holocaust.

Yet not unlike Billy, she, too, seeks to direct her own American production, one in which her husband would finally play the starring role. Sorella works to engineer a meeting between Harry and Billy long after Harry had let go of the idea. She believes that a meeting between them would allow Harry to close that "terrible chapter" of his life. This dream of bringing such terrible chapter to a close says more about Sorella than it does about the lived experiences of aging survivors. When she meets Rose in Jerusalem thirty years after the war, she tries to blackmail the famous man by threatening to publish an incendiary account of his private life written by one his former employees. Billy, a man accustomed to theatrics, does not respond favorably. What follows is a thoroughly "American" scene full of shouting, threats and obscene gestures, a kind of performance ready made for the stage or screen. Billy, apparently, is not the only American who understands the power of the performance.

Like Sorella, Billy Rose is a similarly complex character. While he initially seems to be on the other end of the spectrum from Sorella, an assimilated Jew who wants nothing to do with the Jewish past, we know that for all his American tendencies, Billy was not without a Jewish conscience. Despite his identification with America, Billy is the

only character who actively intervened during the war to save the lives of European Jews. If Sorella is the only one to recognize the connection between death and fantasy and the only character who studies the Holocaust in America, Billy remains living proof that Hollywood can also inspire action. His underground network, the narrator tells us, was inspired by Leslie Howard's role as an undercover hero who saves individuals sentenced to certain death in the 1934 talkie, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934). And, like his historical namesake, he helped produce the *We Will Never Die* pageant, a "Hollywood style" show, headlined by major Hollywood stars that opened at Madison Square Garden in New York in 1943.³⁷

For Billy – like Lars in Ozick's novella – the rights of the imagination (the show) take precedence over history: "Billy views everything as show biz," the narrator tells Sorella in an attempt to explain the reason the meeting between Rose and the narrator never takes place. "Nothing is real that isn't a show. And he wouldn't perform in your show because he's a producer, and producers don't perform" (58). Despite his theatrics, however, when confronted by Sorella in a hotel room in Jerusalem, Billy introduces an important and unexpected historical voice into the novella. For all his antics on the American scene, he was far from naïve when it came to America's role in the Holocaust:

"I did all I could," said Billy. "And for that point of time, that's more than most can say. Go holler at Stephen Wise. Raise Hell with Sam Roseman. Guys were sitting on their hands. They would call Roosevelt and Cordell Hull, who didn't care a damn for Jews, and they were so proud and happy to be close enough to the White House, even getting the runaround was such a delicious privilege. FDR

³⁷ See Robert Skloot's "*We Will Never Die*: The Success and Failure of a Holocaust Pageant," in *Theater Journal* 37.2 (1985), 167-180.

snowed those famous rabbis when they visited him. He blinded them with his footwork, that genius cripple Churchill was also in on this with him. So? There were refugees by the hundred thousands to ship to Palestine. Or there wouldn't have been a state here today. (49)

Through Billy – and his historical namesake – the novel enters the ongoing debate concerning American Jewry's efforts to save European Jews during the Holocaust, a move that gives voice to the argument from David Wyman's 1984 study, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1942-1945*. Like Wyman, Bellow enlarges the scope of the Holocaust to include the actions of the American government and American Jewry – a necessary move in a novella that aims to provide an overview of the Holocaust in American life.

For all his *mishigoss*, Billy—the Broadway producer, partner of Prohibition hoodlums, sidekick of Arnold Rothstein, established multi millionaire, consort of Eleanor Holm, collector of Matisse, Seurat, and nationally syndicated gossip columnist— plays an integral role in this Holocaust story, and one that cannot and should not be forgotten. Billy may have been “spattered as a Jackson Pollock painting,” but “among the main trickles was his Jewishness, with other streaks flowing toward secrecy – streaks of sexual weakness, sexual humiliation” (15). For all his faults, “the God of his fathers” still mattered to Rose. Yet even though Billy acts to save the lives of Europe's Jews, like Sorella, he possesses no desire to transmit anything of the Jewish past to future generations. Even his desire to create a memorial in Jerusalem is described in terms of his personal desire to enter Jewish history.

Through both *Sorella* and *Billy*, Bellow registers the extent to which Jewishness has assumed a reduced role in the lives of American Jews. As Irving Howe explains in a famous essay from 1977: “For better or worse, often both, being Jewish remains something ‘special.’ If no longer an experience coloring every moment of life, as no doubt it was for earlier generations of Jews, it still affects crucial portions and moments of life” (Introduction 4). Yet by the end of the novel, having discovered that Harry, *Sorella* and *Billy* are all dead, even these Jewish “streaks,” and the forms of *Yiddishkayt* or Jewish culture associated with them, are on the verge of disappearing. How the novel confronts this prospect, and the recuperative role that literature plays in this process, is the subject of the final section.

IV

The final section considers how the narrator’s recognition regarding his inability to understand the Holocaust – and the novel’s recognition of the strategies of displacement that have shaped American responses to the Holocaust – connect to larger questions about Jewish continuity in a world without witnesses. Two scenes stand out in this regard. In the first, the narrator discovers an old, grainy photograph of the Fonsteins taken in the Judean desert. Viewing the photo, the narrator struggles to connect this “modern couple” with the fierce, Judean desert that serves as a backdrop. His effort to make sense of the relationship between these modern people and “the burning stones of Ezekiel, not yet (even today entirely cooled),” relates, at least in part, to the narrator’s inability to understand the role that the modern state of Israel, and the Biblical traditions,

play in the lives of assimilated American Jews (70). The photo prompts the following set of reflections:

I couldn't help thinking that Sorella didn't have a real biography until Harry entered her life. And he, Harry, whom Hitler had intended to kill, had a biography insofar as Hitler had marked him for murder, insofar as he had fled, was saved by Billy, reached America, invented a better thermostat. And here they were in color, the Judean desert behind them, as husband and wife in a once-upon-a-time Coney Island might have posed against a painted backdrop or sitting on a slice of moon. As tourists in the Holy Land where were they, I wondered biographically speaking? How memorable had this trip been for them? The question sent me back to myself and, Jewish style, answered itself with yet another question: What was there worth remembering? (70)

Having spent a lifetime trying to untangle himself from his Jewish past, the narrator has no ability to assess what, from that past, is worthy of being remembered. And herein lies the problem: by the time the narrator is ready to remember the past, he has no way of figuring out what to remember and what to forget. With no Jews left alive who might connect him to the pre-American and non-English Jewish past, he struggles to figure out what, from that past, was "worth remembering." It is a struggle, it seems, that makes it increasingly difficult for him to craft a Jewish biography, an inability felt with special intensity at the end of his life.

The great Jewish historian, Yosef Yerushalmi, in a speech delivered at *The Colloque de Royaumont* in 1987, describes the problem of modern historicism in terms

that resonate with the narrator's dilemma in *The Bellarosa Connection*. Yerushalmi explains:

If there is a malignancy, its source lies not in the historical quest, but in the loss of a *halakhah* that will know what to appropriate and what to leave behind, a commonality of values that would enable us to transform history into memory.

This the historian alone cannot accomplish...he cannot tell us what should be forgotten, for that is the prerogative of *Halakhah*. (qtd. in "Zachor" 115)

Where *halakhah* (from the Hebrew 'to go,' or 'path') has long instructed Jews regarding what to receive and what to transmit of the Jewish past, the process of assimilation through migration, marriage, and cultural dilution has eroded and rendered anachronistic that shared system of values, and the people associated with those values. The absence of *halakhah*, coupled with the lack of active persecution in America, results in the disorientation the narrator feels while staring at the old photograph. While Rabbi Irving Greenberg's hoped that Holocaust consciousness would "become a channel to the recovery of the rest of Judaism," the novella seems to suggest that its decline will result in the end of Jewish life (Novick 188).

The Bellarosa Connection foregrounds this problem by way of a brief set of reflections on the first Mishnah of *Avot*. The Mishnah, which describes the Pharisaic "Chain of Tradition," chronicles the movement of Jewish Law as it passes through the hands of various Biblical figures and public bodies. The narrator invokes the Mishnah in the wake of a brief reflection on a friend of Billy's named Wolfe, who, after having an affair with a woman, would pass her own to "somebody more crude and low on the totem

pole” (34). The narrator associates the image of the totem pole with the chain of tradition rehearsed in the Mishnah:

Here I made a citizens arrest, mentally – I checked myself. It was the totem pole that did it. A Jew in Jerusalem, and one who was able to explain where we were at – how Moses had handed on the law to Joshua, and Joshua to the judges, the judges to the Prophets, the Prophets to the Rabbis, so that at the end of the line, a Jew from secular America (a diaspora within a diaspora) could jive glibly about the swinging Village scene of the fifties and about totem poles, about Broadway lowlife and squalor. Especially if you bear in mind that this particular Jew couldn’t say what place he held in this great historical procession. I had concluded long ago that the Chosen were chosen to read God’s mind. Over the millennia, this turned out to be a zero sum game. (34)

The scene combines the “street energy” (totem poles, the swinging village scene, Broadway lowlife) with elite “high-culture rhetoric,” a combination that Irving Howe describes as the chief stylistic innovation associated with Jewish American fiction (15).³⁸ Yet the reference to the Mishnah, which dramatizes the “dual movement of reception and transmission,” ends up drawing attention to the end – not the continuity – of that tradition (110). Both of these scenes present disorientation as the result of the narrator’s inability to connect the Biblical past with the American present, an inability that is intensified with the aging and death of the community of Holocaust survivors. With Harry dead, and with

³⁸ While Howe worries about the fate of Jewish literature in a world where contemporary Jews have become increasingly disconnected from this immigrant past, Bellow, writing a decade later, worries less about the future of Jewish literature, and more, I think, about the inability of Jewish American fiction to sustain any meaningful points of contact with the Judaism grounded in *Halakhah* and transmitted through figures of religious authority – the Judaism, in other words, associated with Mishnah and the Pharisaic “Chain of tradition.”

the Jerusalem survivor unable to produce a coherent testimony, there seems to be no one left to “straighten” him out (8). In this way, he does not confront Harry’s story at the end, nor does he finally connect to collective Jewish history and memory. Instead, he realizes, with painful clarity, “the price you pay for being a child of the New World” (78). And while it might be too late to act, it is not too late to write.

This brings us to the novella’s last scene. After finally locating the Fonsteins’ number, the narrator calls, hoping to reconnect with the couple he hasn’t seen for ten years. A young man taking care of the Fonsteins’ residence answers the phone. The narrator, in the wake of his late life revelation, finds himself in search of a European benefactor: someone who might instruct in the ways of the “real world.” He describes the man who answers the phone as a younger version of himself:

I don’t say that he disowned being a Jew. Evidently he didn’t want to reckon with it. The only life he cared to lead was that of an American. So hugely absorbing, that. So absorbing that one existence was too little for it. It could drink up a hundred existences, if you had them to offer, and reach out for more. (86)

This description, which resonates with Bellow’s account of America in the interview from 1990, only intensifies the narrator’s sense of isolation and the gap between American and European Jewish experience. Unable to “make an impression on a kid like that,” and uncertain about what was worthy of being remembered, the old narrator decides to write everything down: “I chose instead to record everything I could remember of the Bellarosa Connection, and set it all down with Mneosyne flourish” (89).

Regine Rosenthal reads this effort as his response to the aging process and his memory loss, as “a check,” she says, “on the vitality of his own mental powers” (90).

While such readings draw our attention back to the narrator's late-life efforts to remain engrossed in the struggle for individual existence, to defend himself against oblivion, the novel also presents literature itself, and the act of writing the story that is *The Bellarosa Connection*, as alternative form of continuity; an alternative tradition to the one dramatized in the Mishnah.

While the novella ends with the promise to write a novella, to tell the story of Fonstein vs Rose, it also connects this act of writing to a series of other Jewish writers referred to over the course of the novella. One of those writers, mentioned explicitly in *The Bellarosa Connection*, is Proust. As part of the novella's comic mode, the narrator believes that his antique phone – the symbolic instrument associated with the act of connection – once belonged to Baron Charlus, the aristocratic, decadent aesthete, and licentious gay man first introduced in Proust's *Within a Budding Grove* (1919). Purchased by his late wife, Diedre, “on the Boulevard Hausmann,” the phone allows Proust to enter the novella through an unlikely and highly symbolic object associated with the act of communication. The narrator wonders if Charlus used the phone to romance his boyfriends, at the same time that he relies on the phone to carry out his own search for the Holocaust survivor and his American wife. Despite the geographic and temporal differences separating Charlus and the narrator, he refuses to “give up” on either the Baron or his search for the survivor (71,81). In this way, he links Proust's queer aestheticism with the historical sobriety associated with his search for Harry. And here, I think, we find something of the balance that Bellow ascribed to Proust in the interview from 1990, a balance or harmony between aesthetic concerns and historical demands.

Through the history associated with this French phone now located in a Philadelphia mansion, the novella establishes a Jewish literary family tree of sorts, one that connects Proust's France to Philip Roth's Newark (the narrator and Sorella are from Newark), and Bellow's America. This literary tradition presents an alternative to the disintegration and eventual loss of collective memory that has been the express responsibility of the Jewish religious tradition.³⁹ Bellow connects a group of Jewish writers – and we can include Levi on this list as well – who found a way to balance “the aesthetic question with the historical one,” a balance that has been so powerfully challenged within America. *The Bellarosa Connection* is Bellow's late-life effort to restore that balance (“Half a Life” 278).

In this way, literature bears a heavy burden in the post-survivor era as the medium through which the Jewish past is received and transmitted; a role, perhaps, not entirely unlike that played by Rose's wartime rescue operation: while literature cannot replace *Halakhah* as a meaningful system guiding Jewish life, it can serve, through the eyes of an aging narrator, to draw our eyes back towards that past for the sake of the future; a movement that seeks to preserve a form of historical awareness that does not set out to redeem the past or to assimilate it into the present; but that seeks instead to keep that past in front of us as it were, a means by which we might keep the Holocaust present precisely through the recognition regarding the chasm between the American condition and the experiences that shaped the lives of European Jews. *The Bellarosa Connection*, a novella in which Bellow finally “took hold” of events that had long eluded him, dramatizes the

³⁹ Jonathan Rosen describes *Great Jewish Short Stories*, an anthology edited by Bellow and published in 1963, along similar lines: “For a long time I saw *Great Jewish Short Stories* as a way for Bellow to create for himself a sort of Jewish family tree, perhaps in a way Sholem Aleichem did when he called Mendele the grandfather of Yiddish writing” (678).

process by which such historical awareness is achieved by one who did not experience the Holocaust directly. The preservation of the Holocaust depends not on similarities between European and American Jewish experiences, but on the refusal of those who did not experience the Holocaust to assimilate the experiences of those who did through the New World version of reality.

But it is important to remember that this form of transmission does not rely on the force of the testimonial encounter or the testimonial text to transmit the experience of horror to the uninitiated reader, an account championed by trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. Instead, it does so, through a literary sensibility that is powerfully and painfully attuned to the artificiality associated with America's memory of atrocity, a sensibility that keeps the Holocaust present precisely by recognizing, accepting, and sustaining the memory differences between American and European Jews. Only by actively dramatizing the differences between direct and indirect experiences does the aging Bellow, like his aging narrator, attempt to keep the Holocaust present before him, and to sustain the meaning of the events in a world without witnesses.

From here, then, we can look back at Bellow's refusal to meet with Levi 1985. While Bellow, like Billy Rose, might be able to direct and present different versions of the European past for American audiences, offering both promotional logistics and aesthetic mediation, he has little to say to the survivor himself. Yet where Rose may want to keep such entanglements with the past at bay, Bellow, seems to have been far more actively engaged in the late life effort to atone for his earlier detachment. Where Billy, by saving Harry's life, had done all he felt he could do for the European survivor, Bellow was more susceptible to shame and guilt regarding his earlier failure. When facing an

authentic survivor like Levi, one who met the demand and who found a way to write about the Holocaust, Bellow might have recoiled from a sense of diminishment and shame regarding his own inauthenticity, and the evasiveness of his early works. Perhaps all he could do for Levi was the same thing that his narrator does for members of the young generation at the end of *The Bellarosa Connection*: sit down and write the story that he had failed to write as a young man, and that is exactly what he sets out to do in *The Bellarosa Connection*.

CHAPTER FOUR

No Country for Old Men: Old Age and the Holocaust in J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace

In truth, it's easier to manage the problem of death than the problem of living as an old person. Death is a dramatic, one-time crisis while old age is a day-by-day and year-by-year confrontation with powerful external and internal forces, a bittersweet coming to terms with one's own personality and one's life.

-Robert Butler¹

J.M. Coetzee's commitment to technical innovation in fiction has gone hand-in-hand with his long-standing interest in late life, late style, and the backwards-looking action of the life review. Since the publication of *Waiting for the Barbarians* in 1980, Coetzee's novels have routinely – and relentlessly – been focalized by characters that are old or who understand themselves to be in the last phases of their lives. From the aging magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* to Elizabeth Curren, the aging cancer patient in *Age of Iron* (1993), to David Lurie in *Disgrace* (1999) and Elizabeth Costello in *Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), and from Paul Rayment in *Slow Man* (2005) to John C in *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), Coetzee's narrators have all crossed a shadow line into the kingdom of the ill and aged. Like the other writers in this study, Coetzee routinely entwines the experience of late life with reflections on complicity – reflections, as we'll see, that are routinely mediated by Holocaust analogies. Coetzee's writing, then, bears witness to a spread of Holocaust memory and consciousness across the globe, and to the impact that after-Auschwitz thought has had on global histories of colonialism and the era of decolonization. How these strands – i.e. the rhetoric of late life

¹ Robert Butler, *Why Survive: Being Old in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1975), 1.

and the presence of the Holocaust – come together in Coetzee’s *Disgrace* is the subject of this chapter.

I

The other post-Holocaust *Vollendungsromane* considered in this study focus on reinscribing Holocaust memory more generally in the time of its fading from particular or personal memory, a process that generates the late strategies employed by Levi, Roth and Bellow. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, I argue, develops an alternative project, one that replaces the after-Auschwitz imperative to preserve the past or its lessons with a call — also following upon historical trauma — to the practice of what I will call palliation. This distinction between preservation and palliation has everything to do with the fact that while the Jewish writers concentrate primarily on the Holocaust and on the aging and death of Jewish survivors, Coetzee is principally concerned with the fictionalized lives of representatives of late empire, in particular members of the generation who were meant to benefit from Apartheid. But the distinction also speaks to different historical epochs, and if Coetzee is widely considered more emblematic of the current situation than, say, Roth, it may have everything to do with the experience, the dilemmas and needs, of life lived in the shadow of an idea of imperial lateness. In its wake, there has grown an ethos of turning to self-practices and questions of liberatory ethics, in lieu of political projects of democratic representation that invoke and require a thematics of remembering and identity.

The matter of complicity pervades *Disgrace*, and, not surprisingly, it became a touchstone for South African critics who questioned Coetzee's decision to focus a post-Apartheid novel on a member of the generation who was meant to benefit from Apartheid. In a country looking to overcome a violent past, the focus on a white professor whose intellectual allegiances were clearly European and not African was seen as an impediment to the efforts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.⁶ Additionally, by focusing on the lingering presence of the old, writes Vilishini Cooppan, Coetzee's novel reflected the fears and anxieties felt by many South Africans. Cooppan explains:

If you listen enough times, as all South African's who lived through the 1990 did, to the phrase "the 'new' South Africa," you cannot help but hear in it a deep and abiding anxiety, a rhetorical disavowal of the unspoken yet ubiquitous presence of the old. Perhaps we may speak then of "postapartheid" in a similar sense to that in which we speak of "postcolonial" or "postnational," that is, advisedly and with reservation, ever aware of the difficulties and ironies of a prefixed "post" that prematurely announces the passing of a system of domination that actually remains, albeit in residual, reconfigured forms. (348)

The publication of *Disgrace*, which was written at the height of the TRC's efforts to exchange truth for amnesty, presented a powerful counter-narrative to the public and performative political transition from Apartheid to a non-racial democracy.

This wasn't the only problem. Not only was the novel focalized by a white South African, it presented its black characters through racist stereotypes, which led members of the African National Congress to describe *Disgrace* as "outright racist" (qtd. in Jolly

⁶ Hereafter abbreviated TRC.

149). Isidore Diala claims that Coetzee's "black characters are perhaps too deprived, brutalized and aggrieved to inspire hopes of racial harmony" (68). Diala, of course, was not wrong: the black South Africans in the novel can seemingly occupy any position except that of the victims. They can be rapists and conspirators but not people who have suffered and continue to suffer. Derek Attridge, one of Coetzee's better readers, wondered whether this powerful representation of post-Apartheid South Africa would "impede the difficult enterprise of rebuilding the Country" (164). While Salman Rushdie argued that the novel's revelatory vision of "a society of conflicting incomprehension, driven by the absolutes of history," only deepened the darkness it set out to describe, "striving to make of its blindness a sort of metaphysical insight" (299).

To complicate matters further, *Disgrace* actively grafts Holocaust images and tropes onto the South African landscape. This move, which connects the European genocide to the Apartheid regime and its aftermath, looks back to the work of postwar theorists like Hannah Arendt and Aimé Césaire who first drew attention to the continuity of the Holocaust with colonialism.⁷ Where Elizabeth Costello actively invokes Holocaust analogies in order to compare complicity in one context with complicity in another, *Disgrace* unearths the heavily underplayed historical connections between the Apartheid state and the Third Reich.⁸ The early architects of the Apartheid system were in fact keen observers of the Third Reich, some of whom traveled to German universities before the

⁷ Césaire, the French poet and Politian from Martinique, was one of the first to draw attention to the continuity of the Holocaust with colonialism. More recently, Brett Ashley Kaplan has considered the important role that the Holocaust plays in Coetzee's work. See Brett Ashley Kaplan, *Landscapes of Holocaust Postmemory* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 141-98.

⁸ See Patrick Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika: The Impact of the Radical Right on the Afrikaner Nationalist Movement in the Fascist Era* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan UP, 1991); Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990); Howard Simson, *The Social Origins of Afrikaner Fascism and its Apartheid Policy* (Uppsala: Uppsala Studies in Economic History 21, 1980); and Annie Coombes, *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003).

war, importing fascist ideals back into South African legislation. The tenets of National Socialism powerfully influenced the Apartheid state, and *Disgrace* brings this echo to the surface in uncomfortable and ambiguous ways. From the incinerator onto which the bodies of the dogs are fed, to the repeated use of German words and especially the word *lösung*, with its terrible echoes of the *Endlösung* or final solution, to the weekly killing sessions at the animal clinic, to the fact that David Lurie is briefly set on fire, Holocaust images and tropes proliferate across the South African landscape.⁹

In addition to the haunting presence of the Holocaust, the novel also includes an important, if overlooked, Jewish presence. Both Lurie and Isaacs (the last name of the young student with whom David has an affair) are Jewish names, and David appears to attend a Sabbath meal at the Isaacs' home towards the end of the novel.¹⁰ Stephen Silverstein equates David's "elderly" and anachronistic status with the fact of his Jewishness, which, he says, is "summoned up to promote his exclusion from the 'new South Africa'" (85). In earlier pastoral novels (or *plaasromans*), which feature white South Africans seeking to legitimize Afrikaner ownership of African land, Jews were singled out on account of their "unfitness for inclusion within post-apartheid South Africa" (Silverstein 89). David Lurie, then, is a symbol of his "race's degeneracy while providing an essentializing, physical rationale for the exclusion of whites whom he

⁹ Anke Pinkert offers the following description of the presence of German words in *Disgrace*: "As *Disgrace* took me to the unfamiliar terrain of post-apartheid South Africa, the German words scattered throughout the novel had an uncanny presence. First seemingly harmless – *ländlich* (rural), *eingewurzelt* (rooted), and then there it was: *lösen*, *Lösung* (solution – final solution?), loudly echoing in the South African landscape the German atrocities committed in the name of racial purity" (qtd in Kaplan 191). See also Peter McDonald "Disgrace Effects," in *Interventions* 4.3 (2002): 321-330.

¹⁰ The name Lurie, which is common among Jewish South Africans, dates back "at least as far as 1986" (Silverstein 83). For a complete account of the genealogy of the name Lurie see Neil Rosenstein, *The Lurie Legacy: The House of Davidic Royal Descent* (New York: Avotaynu, 2004).

synechdochically represents, from the African platteland” (95).¹¹ In Silverstein’s account, David is both a white “perpetrator,” a member of the generation who was meant to benefit from Apartheid and a Jew who must be excluded in order to pave the way towards a “new” South Africa. In this way, the novel blurs the lines between histories of violence, and entwines histories that are routinely considered along competitive lines.¹²

In *Disgrace* no one can claim innocence, and even the children are bound up with historically determined guilt. Petrus, the man who works on the Lucy’s farm, is noticeably absent during the attack, and the fact that he is related to one of the attackers suggests his possible involvement. Lucy’s willingness to read her rape as a form of historical vengeance and her desire to live on the land at any cost, suggests a measure of complicity with her assailants, and a more general condition of white guilt, while David’s initial inability to align his treatment of Melanie, the young student with whom he has an affair, with his daughter’s rapists speaks to his complicity with the patriarchal power that legitimizes rape. David finds himself in the remarkable position of being both a man accused of rape and one who seeks to punish his daughter’s rapists. Even Bev Shaw, the woman who runs the animal welfare clinic where David volunteers, is presented as a woman who lovingly euthanizes dogs. If a god presides over the novel it is the “god of chaos and mixture,” a god that forcefully entangles identities and histories in ways that cannot be unbraided (“Disgrace” 105).

¹¹ Lurie is attuned to the history of European Anti-Semitism. This becomes clear following a brief exchange with Petrus, the black farmhand who eventually takes over Lucy’s farm. After telling David that girls are too expensive, and that he hopes his next child will be a boy, he makes the hand gesture where he rubs his thumb and forefinger together. The narrator explains: “A long time since he last saw that gesture. Used of the Jews, in the old days: money-money-money, with the same meaningful cock of the head. But presumably Petrus is innocent of that snippet of European tradition” (130).

¹² For a recent account of this form of competitive memory see Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009).

This ambiguity and confusion, says Brett Ashley Kaplan, makes the attribution of “guilt, innocence, confession, forgiveness and reconciliation... impossible to determine” (189). “Because the innocent refuse innocence,” she goes on to say, “[and] because victim and perpetrator live in close proximity, help each other out, and need each other, reconciliation is severely compromised and all are complicit” (191). In this way, Coetzee’s vision of a post-apartheid South Africa comes much closer to Primo Levi’s notion of the gray zone than it does to the image of a Country that has “overcome” or “worked through” its traumatic past. The frustration associated with reading Coetzee’s novel can be traced to the impossibility of assigning blame in any clear way. Personal actions look back to historical causes, which make it almost impossible to draw clear lines between the innocent from the guilty. And in the same way that ambiguity in Primo Levi’s last work seeks to offset simplistic Manichean narratives regarding the Holocaust, the ambiguity and complicity in Coetzee’s last work complicates the narrative of the County’s smooth transition from an old and repressive order to a new and democratic one.

What’s more, while Elizabeth Costello may be attuned to complicity and actively seek to set herself apart, David Lurie remains thoroughly insulated against the ambiguity and the complicity that informs the novel. His conservatism and sense of detachment are the motors of this insulation. He lives in the “new” South Africa, but he continues to cling to old sexual, political and social codes. David Attwell writes that it is when these codes “drift into obsolescence” but nevertheless continue to be employed that we are led to “become even more detached from our objects of desire than we normally are” (“Coetzee’s Estrangements” 4). David’s apartness from others is a key feature of the

novel, and it is one that David himself explains by the fact of his age. The relationship between the rhetorics of desire and old age that the novel explores is the subject of the next section.

II

Surprisingly few critics have focused on the idiom of old age and retirement that runs continuously through the novel.¹³ Because David Lurie is only fifty-two, it is perhaps not surprising that critics have routinely considered David's age and the novel's interest in lateness along allegorical lines. Jane Poyner, for instance, argues that Lurie's frailty and growing sense of obsolescence points towards the "degeneration of the white-owned farm and, by association, of colonialist domination" (71). Peter D. McDonald reads the novel as an "allegory about what is happening to the human race in the post-colonial era" (326). These provocative allegorical readings, however, tend to look past the novel's serious and almost obsessive fascination with the rhetoric of old age and with the presence of the old in the "new" South Africa. From repeated references to the "old, *landliche* way of life," to the "old" objects strewn across Lucy's small farm in Grahamstown on the Eastern Cape, to David's love of the old masters, to the fact that he produces his own late work at the end of the novel, to the references to late works and aging artists, the narrator of *Disgrace*, like Roth's Zuckerman, is highly attuned to the

¹³ Helen Small, whose reading of the novel guides my own, claims that Lurie's preferred idiom is not "that of mid-life crisis but of old age, retirement, [and] more provocatively (in the political context) serving out the end of one's time. This is repeatedly how he explains any failure of historical and contemporary political imagination on his own part" (217).

presence of the old and his own anachronistic state.¹⁴ Yet unlike Zuckerman, whose body and mind are running out of steam, David is too young to make a legitimate claim on old age.¹⁵ In this way, the novel draws attention to a distinction between the biological aging that supervenes on all creatures' lives and certain experiences — especially those of trauma — that result in anachronistic, obsolescent, and isolated states of mind and ways of life.¹⁶

In *The Coming of Age*, Simon de Beauvoir describes the onset of old age not in terms of the cognitive or physical symptoms associated with old age, but rather as an effect of the changing ways that others see the self. As one becomes aware of these changes, he or she must confront what de Beauvoir describes as the “insoluble contradiction between the obvious clarity of the inward feeling that guarantees our unchanging quality and the objective certainty of our transformation” (290). The form of double consciousness that results, says de Beauvoir, cannot be reconciled; all we can do “is waver from one to the other, never managing to hold them both firmly together” (290). In the end, she goes on to say, we must finally “submit to the outsider’s point of view” (290). *Disgrace* foregrounds this process, focusing on David’s active refusal to submit to the outsider’s point of view.

¹⁴ Critics have long praised the strength of Coetzee’s late style. For example, see Hermann Wittenberg, “Late Style in J.M. Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year*,” in *Scrutiny* 2 15.2 (2010), 40-49.

¹⁵ Despite the focus on his own age, David never considers that, at fifty-two, he has outlived the vast majority of Black South Africans. The question he doesn’t ask, says Helen Small is: “When did a black African last die of old age?” To do so, she suggests, would force him to address the stark inequality regarding life expectancy rates separating white and black South Africans under Apartheid. For Black African men born between 1945-1947 (roughly corresponding to Lurie’s generation), the expected lifespan was 36 years, some twenty years less than that of white males (Small 219).

¹⁶ Like Lurie, Elizabeth Costello also feels that she has survived into a new age in which she is no longer at home. The codes she relies on to understand the world have become old and outdated: “The twentieth century of Our Lord, Satan’s century, is over and done with,” she says. “Satan’s century and her own too. If she happens to have crept over the finish line into the new age, she is certainly not at home in it” (EC 180).

When the novel opens, Lurie is in the midst of responding to the changing ways that others see him. After years of being able to easily attract women, David finds himself suddenly invisible before their gaze. The change has brought his former way of life to an abrupt end:

With his height, his good bones, his olive skin, his flowing hair, he could always count on a degree of magnetism. If he looked at a woman a certain way, with a certain intent, she would return his look, he could rely on that. That was how he lived; for years, for decades, that was the backbone of his life. Then one day it all ended. Without warning his powers fled. Glances that would have once responded to his slid over, past, through him. Overnight he became a ghost. If he wanted a woman he had to learn to pursue her; often, in one way or another, to buy her. (7)

For a man of the city, a man who has always felt “at home amid the flux of bodies where eros stalks and glances flash like arrows,” David, like the aging Nathan Zuckerman who returns to the city of his youth as an old man, finds himself reduced to a ghost-like status (6). Where Roth’s *Exit Ghost* dramatizes the division between Nathan’s decaying body and the vitality of his renewed sexual desire, *Disgrace*, at least initially, examines the tension between the unchanging force of David’s desire and the changing way that members of the opposite sex see him.

Despite its charged political and historical context, the novel opens with the private and personal problem of sex after a certain age. “For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (1). Through the careful use of commas, the sentence draws attention to the highly subjective and limited

quality of David's apparent solution. At the same time, it entwines David's chronological age with the years of the apartheid government.¹⁷ To solve the problem, David has set up weekly meetings with the prostitute Soraya. During his Thursday afternoons with her he manages to dispel some of the illusions of late longing, and feels himself released from his growing sense of sexual isolation.

David's professional status, we soon discover, mirrors his sexual status.¹⁸ As a former 'professor of literature,' his professional title has recently been down-graded to 'adjunct professor of communications,' a shift linked to the corporate restructuring of the University. David, who has witnessed the shift from a broadly humanist curriculum to a free market model of learning, sees himself, and members of his generation, as a relic from the old world: "He has never been much of teacher; in this transformed, and to his mind, emasculated institution of learning he is more out of place than ever. But then, so are other of his colleagues from the old days, burdened with upbringings inappropriate to the tasks they are set to perform; clerks in a post-religious age" (4). Within the classroom – a site that plays an integral role over the novel's first half – David, like the aging Primo Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved*, struggles to communicate with a generation of students he describes as "post-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate" (32). His indifference towards the new "communications" curriculum is reflected in his students' indifference towards him. Since he has no "respect for the material he teaches, he makes

¹⁷ While he remains largely indifferent to his affiliation with the history of Apartheid, and while he has done a good job creating a life purged of unpleasant entanglements, the novel's present tense version of free and direct discourse allows the readers to make the connections to which David, for most of the novel, remains blind. Gayatri Spivak argues that David's failure to understand or "read" those around him becomes the "the rhetorical signal to the active reader to counterfocalize," the means by which the novel communicates to the active reader to fill out the stories that are not, in fact, vocalized (22).

¹⁸ For a comprehensive reading of "the times" within *Disgrace*, which includes an assessment of David's status within the university see Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2004).

no impression on the students. They look through him when he speaks, forget his name. Their indifference galls him more than he will admit” (4). In this way, the novel draws an imperfect analogy between his students’ indifference towards him and the indifference he feels before women. David suffers from a lack of connection, and in both cases, he experiences this as a loss of power or status, attributable to the fact of his advancing age.

When his relationship with Soraya falls apart, the problem of sex returns to the fore. To David’s mind, he has two options: he can either continue to pursue young women and accept his status as a “Dirty Old Man,” or he can internalize his culture’s demand to behave with dignity and begin his decent towards death.¹⁹ All of David’s thoughts about old age are in one way or another entangled with the question of desire, and are inscribed in a dialectical tension between Eros and Thanatos, carnal love and physical death. Castration, which is an important trope within the novel, becomes the action that would finally permit him to join the community of the aged: “At what age, he wonders, did Origen castrate himself? Not the most graceful of solutions, but then aging is not a graceful business. A clearing of the decks, at least, so that one can turn one’s mind to the proper business of the old: preparing to die” (9). His decision to pursue a relationship with Melanie Isaacs, one of his young students, can be read against the backdrop of the highly circumscribed options available to him.

The affair, of course, does not end well. After an act of unwanted sex, during which Melanie is compared to an animal caught in the jaws of predator, a sexual harassment trial is convened that leads to David’s dismissal from the university. Yet

¹⁹ Helen Small describes the choice along different lines: David can either “accept the necessity of his own mortality (literally, to die; figuratively, to give up on his life in South Africa, perhaps to leave the country) or to be prepared to submit to change without visible limits – change so comprehensive that he would no longer be recognizable to himself” (220).

when David reflects on the trial over the course of the novel, he repeatedly thinks of himself – and not Melanie – as the victim of a different kind of crime. The trial, in his mind, aims to punish him for breaking the ancient taboo regarding sex between the old and the young. Consider how David’s explanation of the trial, which invokes an evolutionary bias, displaces any reflections of the history:

The marriage of Cronos and Harmony: unnatural. That was what the trial was set up to punish, once all the fine words were stripped away. On trial for his way of life. For unnatural acts: for broadcasting old seed, tired seed, seed that does not quicken, *contra naturam*. If the old men hog the young women, what will be the future of the species? That, at bottom, was the case for the prosecution. Half of literature is about it: young women struggling to escape from under the weight of old men, for the sake of the species.

He sighs. The young in one another’s arms, heedless, engrossed in the sensual music. No country, this, for old men. He seems to be spending a lot of time sighing. Regret: a regrettable note on which to go out. (190)

David frames trial along mythic and literary lines: the trial gives voice to Western culture’s long-standing aversion to unions between old men and beautiful young girls, and by taking up with Melanie he has disturbed the natural order, transgressed the mythic law that the young marry the young, and that the old remove themselves from the sexual economy for the sake of the species. While Byron and artistic heroes of his stature may be able to break the taboo with relative impunity, David, adjunct professor of communications, is not so fortunate, or at least not so fortunate anymore.

Despite describing himself as a “servant of Eros,” and a man guided by “impulses that he could not resist,” David’s Romantic rhetoric only further isolates him in the eyes of the members of the sexual harassment committee (52, 215). Not surprisingly, they don’t react favorably to David’s romantic account of himself as a man in the service of unbearable urges. While Elaine Winters sees him as a “hangover from the past,” Faroodia Rasool, one of the women on the committee, refuses to accept his pattern of historical evasion:

Yes, he says, he is guilty; but when we try to get specificity, all of a sudden it is not abuse of a young woman he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused, no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is a part. (53)

For Faroodia, David’s reading of the act along mythic and literary lines allows him to evade the “history of exploitation” of which his individual action is of a piece. Doing so, says Helen Small, would “require him to change in ways that would leave him unrecognizable to himself,” and that seems to be exactly what he doesn’t want (220).

To avoid acknowledging Melanie’s pain, or his own affiliation with his country’s traumatic past, David describes himself as a man who is too old to change, one who has moved “beyond the reach of counseling.” “After a certain age,” he says to his daughter, one can no longer “plead guilty to charges of turpitude and expect a flood of sympathy in return. Not after a certain age. After a certain age one is no longer appealing and that’s that. One just has to buckle down and live out the rest of one’s life. Serve one’s time” (67). By imagining that he was punished for refusing to internalize the cultural demand that old men act with dignity, he holds fast to the idea that he has grown too old to bend

to the demands being made on him by the committee. In this way, then, the rhetoric of old age has served both an explanatory and a defensive function for David. On the one hand, it allows him to make sense of the trial, while on the other hand it serves to protect him from the demands that he awaken to history, to others' suffering, others' deaths, and to his shameful complicity in all of this.

III

David's premature account of himself as old, an account constructed to protect himself, is brought into poignant relief following the attack on the farm. Exiled from University, David takes up residence on his daughter's small farm on the Eastern Cape. During his stay on the farm, as he struggles to adapt to the rhythms of country life, David's world is turned upside down by a violent attack. The attack involves three black men who gain access to Lucy's house under false pretenses. Once inside, they men gang rape Lucy, shoot the dogs in the kennels, then set fire to David's scalp before stealing his car. David, who spends the duration of the attack locked in an upstairs bathroom, is left to imagine the scene of rape that he did not directly witness. In its aftermath, David, whose status as a professor has been revoked, abandons his former vocation as a literary critic and belatedly begins work on a chamber opera about Byron last affair with Contessa Guiccioli. At the same time, he continues to volunteer at an animal welfare clinic, where, with Bev Shaw's help, he euthanizes dogs that nobody is willing to adopt.

To make sense of David's condition in the aftermath of the attack, the narrator compares his condition to that of an apathetic and indifferent old man – a comparison, I

want to suggest, that challenges a narrative view of lives, and that looks back to an important line of after-Auschwitz thought associated with Theodor Adorno's work. Consider the way that the narrator's describes David's condition through recourse to the image of an old man:

For the first time he has a taste of what it will be like to be an old man, tired to the bone, without hopes, without desires, indifferent to the future. Slumped on a plastic chair amid the stench of chicken feathers and rotting apples, he feels his interest in the world draining from him drop by drop. It may take weeks, it may take months before he is bled dry, but he is bleeding. When he is finished, he will be like a fly-casing in a spider web, brittle to the touch, lighter than a rice-chaff, ready to float away... In a while the organism will repair itself, and I, the ghost within it will be my old self again. But the truth, he knows, is otherwise. His pleasure in living has been snuffed out. Like a leaf on a stream, like a puffball on a breeze, he has begun to float towards his end... The blood of life is leaving his body and despair taking its place, despair that is like a gas, odorless, tasteless, without nourishment. You breath it in, your limbs relax, you cease to care, even at the moment when the steel touches your throat. (107-8)²¹

²¹ In the aftermath of the attack, David and Lucy are both described as ghosts, figures who haunt the worlds that they used to inhabit, shadows of their former selves. David turns to the image of a senile old woman to make sense of Lucy's condition:

She sits in her housecoat and slipper with yesterday's newspaper on her lap. Her hair hangs lank; she is overweight in a slack, unhealthy way. More and more she has begun to look like one of those women who shuffle around corridors of nursing homes whispering to themselves. Why should Petrus bother to negotiate? She cannot last: leave her alone and in due course she will fall like rotten fruit. (205)

Where David has been previously consumed with the ways that others see him, the attack leaves him with a taste of what he understands it will feel like to be an old man. In this state, David's indifference extends to everyone and everything: "Lucy's future, his future, the future of the land as a whole – it is all a matter of indifference, he wants to say; let it all go to the dogs, I do not care" (107). The experience of old age, which is used to shed light on David's subjectivity in the wake of the traumatic attack, is described as a form of blood letting, where the self is slowly emptied of the ability to care for anyone or anything (24). In this state, the self is rendered unrecognizable, a shell of its former self.

Contrary to accounts of old age in which the decline of physical power is compensated by the emergence of new virtues, this image describes a process of irreversible decline in which the self is rendered increasingly unrecognizable and increasingly at the mercy of larger, natural forces. This image of the apathetic and indifferent old man looks back to Primo Levi's famous description of the absolute victims in the camps, those inmates who occupied a liminal space between life and death, and who introduced a fate worse than death.

In *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi describes the figure of the *Musselmänner* or the absolute victim, in ways that connect to the description of the aging and indifferent old man *Disgrace*.²² Consider Levi's description of the victims who were unable to adapt to life in the camps:

Their life is short but their number is endless; they, the *Musselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass,

²² Primo Levi's poem, "Approdo" (Landing), discussed briefly at the start of the first chapter, similarly depicts a man who has entered a state of psychological retirement. This poetic subject is described as a man who "fears nothing, hopes for nothing, expects nothing, / But stares fixedly at the setting sun" (Felman 25). This state, freed from active entanglements, is described as a form of happiness.

continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark already dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.

They crowd my memory with their faceless presences, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen. (90)

The indifference, emptiness and apathy that results from the inmates' exposure to such disorienting persecution anticipates the account of the old man in *Disgrace*, one who has also become "too empty to really suffer." Where Levi's absolute victims follow "the slope to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea," the narrator in *Disgrace* deploys a series of similes – "like a fly-casing in a spider web," "like a leaf on a stream, like a puffball on a breeze" (107) – to represent the impact of trauma on David's psyche.²³ The similes suggest the creation of a state that bears no relation to its former life, and one that challenges the narrative view of lives.²⁴ As Levi says: "All the musselmans who finished in the gas chambers, have the same story, or more exactly, have no story" (90). In this state of existence, shorn of the personal markers of identity and culture, the

²³ The language of emptying and the repeated images of the traumatized self as a hollowed out shell floating towards its end echoes the language of Paul Celan's famous poem, *Todesfuge (Death Fugue)*, in which the cremated Jews are described along similar lines as smoke climbing to the sky.

²⁴ For an account of the claim that lives are comprehensible only in narrative term see Alasdair MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1985). For a critique of this position see Galen Strawson, "A Fallacy of Our Age: Not Every Life is a Narrative," in *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 Oct. 2004, 13-15.

inmate in Auschwitz becomes synonymous with the figures of the very old, an association made by Theodor Adorno to describe the impact of Auschwitz on our understanding of the narrative shape of lives.

In *Negative Dialectics* and his lectures from 1965, Adorno aligns the experiences of the inmates with the figures of the very old. Both, he says, present a direct challenge to the idea of a life as something “stretching out in time so that it can be narrated, and rounded off its own death” (“Metaphysics” 134). This sense of the unity of a life aligns a concept of selfhood with the coherence of a narrative with a progression through beginning, middle, and end. It was this “epic wholeness of life,” which Adorno aligns with the lifespan of the biblical Abraham who “died of old and sated with life” that was powerfully disrupted by the camps (“Metaphysics” 134). According to Adorno, Auschwitz destroyed old age as a meaningful category: “...old age, with categories such as wisdom and all that goes with it, no longer exists, and that old people, in so far as they are condemned to become aged and to weak to preserve their own lives, are turned into objects of science – the science of gerontology as it is called” (“Metaphysics” 106). The camps, like the figures of the very old, undercut the illusion of a self-contained life to which “death might correspond as something meaningful” (“Metaphysics” 134). Just as the camps are unintelligible from what proceed and come after them, old age is neither a culmination of past life, nor an indication of end-of-life redemption.²⁵

²⁵ This fact, says Adorno, becomes painfully clear when we watch those we love grow old. On account of the changes brought on by age, one becomes increasingly unrecognizable insofar as the things that justified their “definition as human, crumble without illness, without violence from outside” (“Negative” 371). This process, which looks back to Levi’s image of the *Musselmänner*, destroys confidence in a person’s “transcendent duration”: the belief that, even in the face of such disintegration, that “the core of men continues to exist” (“Negative” 371). See the introduction for a fuller account of Adorno’s position.

For the secular Adorno, the effort to sustain such a view after Auschwitz was connected to the effort to shield the self from the reality of suffering (“Metaphysics” 134), a topic to which we will return. Additionally, and importantly, old age obviously challenges the preference for progress which is the basic assumption of the *Bildungsroman*. As Helen Small says: “Old age is, in fact, a good example of why many lives are not like progress narratives” (100). This can explain Adorno’s penchant for late style and last works – works that disabuse us of the narrative unity and wholeness we are led to expect from life. How to live with this knowledge, how to live “lately,” or in the absence of progress narratives, is a theme that links Adorno and Coetzee.

Turning back to *Disgrace*, we can detect Adorno’s influence on the image of the old man who has become a shell of his former self, and by taking aim at the progressive narrative view of lives, Coetzee’s novel situates itself in a direct line of after-Auschwitz thought. It is no wonder that David, who turns to art to restore a sense of lost wholeness, ends up producing a late work – a work, as we’ll see, that ends up reflecting – not curing – his condition. For Coetzee, as for Adorno, the late work becomes the appropriate crucible for art produced in the aftermath of trauma, a means by which to give shape to losses that cannot be cured or transcended or historically, progressively, overcome.

IV

At the start of the novel, David, the author of three books of literary criticism, declares his desire to abandon academic prose in order to begin work on an opera about “Byron in Italy, a meditation on love between the sexes in the form of the chamber

opera” (4). Having grown tired of “prose measured by the yard,” he longs for a means by which to bring himself and his daughter back to life, to wrest himself from the protracted state of apathy and indifference.²⁶ He worries, however, that he might not have the strength to bring his fictional characters to life:

Again the feeling washes over him: listlessness, indifference, but also weightlessness, as if he has been eaten away from inside and only the eroded shell of his heart remains. He, he thinks to himself, can a man in his state find words, find music that will bring back the dead?” (156)²⁷

Yet instead of finding a way to transform the drowned into the saved, David ends up reflecting on the aftermath of a relationship that has run out of steam, and on a middle aged woman’s futile longing for a man who has grown old and indifferent towards her.

Consider the opera’s remarkable course of development. At first, David conceives of it as a “chamber-play about love and death, with a passionate young woman and a once passionate but now less than passionate older man” (180). The aging Byron, who has grown tired with his young lover, begins “to long for a quiet retirement,” and “failing that, for apotheosis, for death” (180). In this version, David’s Byron turns his attention to what David earlier describes as the “proper business of the old: preparing to die” (9). Yet while this version of the opera is formally sound it “fails to engage the core of him” (181). His problem is not with Byron, however; for the aging and indifferent man he can

²⁶ In an interview with David Atwell, Coetzee describes a similar reticence with regard to literary criticism. Coetzee explains:

Let me point here to the inherent tension between on the one hand the artist, to whom what we can call “the question of ones life” or “the question of how, in ones own case, to live” may be the source of a drama that plays itself out over time, with many ups and downs, and on the other hand the critic or observer or reader who wants to package and label the artist and his particular question” and move on elsewhere. No offence intended.

²⁷ Echoing an earlier description of Melani Isaacs during the unwanted sex act with David, Lucy refers to her as a “dead person” unable to resume her former life.

find the right words. Instead, his problem is with the young Teresa that history has bequeathed him. This “young, greedy, willful, petulant” woman who rails against her older lover does not match up with the music David “has dreamed of, music whose harmonies, lushly autumnal yet edged with irony, he hears shadowed in his inner ear” (181). For the opera to engage the core of him, for it to bring him back from this ghost-like state, he must abandon the historical Teresa, and turn himself over to the creative process. Yet instead of developing a different character, he exchanges the young, passionate Teresa with a middle-aged version. This “dumpy little widow,” he tells us, spends her days caring for her aging father, running his household, and absorbed in thoughts about her brief affair with Byron. Time, we soon discover, has not been kind to the middle-aged Teresa: “With her heavy bust, her stocky trunk, her abbreviated legs, she looks more like a peasant, a *Contadina*, than an aristocrat” (181).

In this new version, Byron is long dead, and Teresa, mourning her own youth, clings to the memory of her famous lover and their short affair. “Her years with Byron constitute the apex of her life. Byron’s love is all that sets her apart. Without him she is nothing: a woman past her prime, without prospects, living out her days in a dull provincial town....sleeping alone” (182). Cut off from the source of life, the middle aged Teresa exists in an anachronistic state similar to David.²⁸ The desire and passion that coursed through the young Teresa, has been replaced by the longing and nostalgia for a past love that animates the middle aged Teresa.²⁹ Her “sole remaining claim to

²⁸ While critics have focused on the failure of David’s sympathetic imagination, the opera suggests that differences in age – not gender – are the primary cause of his imaginative impasse.

²⁹ In a short story published in *The New York Review of Books*, the aging novelist, Elizabeth Costello, describes this reorientation towards the past that accompanies late life as follows: “Just as spring is the season that looks forward to summer, so autumn is the season that looks back. The desires conceived by the autumnal brain cells are autumnal desires, nostalgic, layered in memory. They no longer have the heat of

immortality, and the solace of her lonely nights,” we are told, were “the cheerful letters and memorabilia she keeps under her bed, what she calls her *reliquie*, which her grandnieces are meant to open after her death and peruse with awe” (181). The opera, now in a late phase, features Teresa’s final efforts to bring her dead lover back to life, and to renew the affair that gives meaning to her life.

Byron, however, does not want to be revived; does not want to return to the world of the living. Described as “*secca*, dry,” he no longer seeks out or desires the chaos of love, or the longing that follows in its wake. In death, he has moved beyond desire: “*It has dried up, the source of everything*” (183). Teresa meanwhile struggles to revive a man who does not want to be revived and seeks to restore a relationship that ended long ago. To capture the mood, David exchanges the lush melodies of the piano for the sparse sounds of a seven-string banjo that used to belong to Lucy (183). Despite his absorption in the work, and despite his hope that it may give him a reason to return to society, David soon realizes that it is “going nowhere.” The narrative resolves into one “long halting cantilena hurled by Teresa into the empty air, punctuated now and then with groans and sighs from Byron offstage” (214). Helen Small describes its failure in terms of a Romanticism that has run “out of energy, no longer able to express (though still subject to) the ‘swell [of] feeling’, the ‘hammer of blood in [the] throat,’ and no longer likely to issue in political action” (219). David, who is attuned to these limitations, hopes only that he might produce one note of “immortal longing”: “As for recognizing it,” he says, “he will leave that to the scholars of the future, if there are still scholars by then” (214). Art may not be able to offer him any kind of cure for the rupture that defines his life, but

summer; what intensity they have is multivalent, complex, turned more toward the past than toward the future” (Coetzee “As a Woman Grows Older”).

perhaps it can provide what Primo Levi describes as a “moment of reprieve”: a temporary break from an inhospitable universe and those natural powers that transform life into death and youth into old age. In the end, however, the opera project bears witness to David’s inability to reconcile his life before the attack with the condition into which he has fallen in its aftermath.

Insofar as it dramatizes the end of the artist’s attempts at formal mastery, the work looks back to Adorno’s (and Edward Said’s) account of “late style.” Abandoning conventions such as the formal features that produce the “harmony that the classicist aesthetic is in the habit of demanding from works of art” (“Music” 564), the late works can come apart, as the artist can no longer hold “the masses of material that he used to form” (“Music” 566).³⁰ What remains, however, is the sense of progressive deepening that Adorno aligns with late style: “For Adorno,” says Edward Said, “lateness is the idea of surviving beyond what is acceptable and normal; in addition, lateness included the idea that one cannot really go beyond lateness at all, cannot transcend or lift oneself out of lateness, but can only deepen the lateness” (“On Late Style” 13). And here we can chart an important point of connection between Teresa’s impossible longing, David’s state in the aftermath of the attack, and the final lines that Bev Shaw’s delivers in *Disgrace*: “One gets used to things getting harder,” says Bev, “one ceases to be surprised that what used

³⁰ By turning away from the subjective experience of the artist, and from the claims of subjectivism more generally, Adorno focuses on the confrontation of subjectivity with its own impotence. Consider the following passage from Adorno’s essay, “Late Style in Beethoven”:

The power of subjectivity in the late works of art is the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves. It breaks their bonds, not in order to express itself, but in order, expressionless, to cast off the appearance of art. Of the late works themselves it leaves only fragments behind and communicates itself, like a cipher, only through the blank spaces from which it has disengaged itself. Touched by death, the hand of the master sets free the masses of material that he used to form; it tears and it fissures, witnesses to the finite powerlessness of the I confronted with Being are its final work. (566)

to be as hard as hard can be grows harder yet” (219). The lines echo back through a number of literary works, including Bernard Malamud’s *The Fixer*, to Edgar’s lament upon encountering his old father in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. A similar sentiment is expressed at the start of Cynthia Ozick’s *The Shawl*, a post-Holocaust *Vollendungsroman* in which Rosa, an aging Holocaust survivor, describes her experience of growing old in Miami: “Once I thought the worst was the worst,” says Rosa, “after that nothing could be the worst. But now I see, even after the worst there’s still more” (14). David, like Rosa, is facing the “still more,” and it is in this space defined by a reduced set of expectations that he must learn to live, adapting to changes that he cannot prevent.

Part of this entails a willingness to forecast his growing obscurity in the “new” South Africa, a world embodied in the gray zone of Lucy’s farm and its surroundings. In a pivotal scene from the end of the novel, David, after a falling-out with Lucy over her decision to carry the child of rape to term, travels to visit her again on the farm. On his approach, he finds Lucy at work in the field. The sight of her solid presence leads him to reflect on his own diminishing presence in her life and the life of his family. He thinks of himself as part of a line of “existences in which his share, his gift, will grow inexorably less and less, till it may as well be forgotten” (217). Instead of seeking to resist to this process, this line of thought leads him to reflect on his impending status as a grandfather: “A grandfather. A Joseph. Who would have thought it! What pretty girl can he expect to be wooed into bed with a grandfather? [...] As a grandfather he will probably score lower than average too” (217). For the first time he actively entertains the possibility of a new role, one which involves, among other things, a reduction in the range of possible sexual partners. He wonders if, in time, the old virtues that govern his life might give way to

virtues of “equanimity, kindness, [and] patience” (217-8). For guidance, he looks to Victor Hugo, the “poet of grandfatherhood,” a writer, he thinks, who might be able to teach him something about his new role (218). This willingness to adapt to his new condition, to accept the changes that have shaken him to the core, extend to his decision to enter into a sexual relationship with Bev Shaw, a move that suggests an alternative to his earlier, narrower conception of old age.³¹

No longer a devoted “servant of Eros,” David undertakes his affair with Bev in a different style. During their sexual encounters, which take place not in a hotel as with Soraya, nor even on a bed, but on the floor of the room where they euthanize dogs, David, the former sexual predator, imagines himself as the object of Bev’s desire: “He pushes the blanket aside and gets up, making no effort to hide himself. Let her gaze her fill on her Romeo, he thinks, on his bowed shoulders and skinny shanks. It is indeed late” (150). While the passage is tainted with his signature irony, it also points towards a relaxing of the standards that defined his earlier life: “Let me not forget this day, he tells himself, lying beside her when they are spent. After the sweet young flesh of Melanie Isaacs, this is what I have come to. This is what I will have to get used to, this and even less than this” (150).

Critics have described David’s transformation over the course of the novel in a number of ways. For instance, Elleke Boehmer describes David’s transition from “the

³¹ These exchange of physical power for new virtues looks back to a scene where David reflects on the “old thoughts” that continue to linger in his mind. One of these “old thoughts,” he tells us, involves his disdain for women who “make no effort to be attractive,” who refuse to make themselves amenable before the male gaze. The group consists of Bev, Lucy, and all of Lucy’s friends. The narrator explains:

He does not like women who make no effort to be attractive. It is a resistance he has had to Lucy’s friend’s before. Nothing to be proud of: a prejudice that has settled in his mind, settled down. His mind has become a refuge for old thoughts, idle, indignant, with nowhere else to go. He ought to chase them out, sweep the premises clean. But he does not care to do so, or does not care enough. (72)

possibility of achieving closure on a painful past, of ever adequately saying sorry” to the “far more painful process of enduring rather than transcending the degraded present” (343). While Helen Small emphasizes the shift from the “the rhetoric of old age to the language of endurance, which asks us to think not about aging as a movement towards death, but about the human ability to go on living and suffering, in the knowledge that the end is inevitable” (226). What these readings look past, however, is the extent to which David’s transformation is connected not just to a shift in the rhetorical strategies of the novel but to the character’s own developing, subjective understanding of his old age. In particular, where old age had previously been imagined by David in terms of the absence of desire, in the aftermath of the attack it becomes associated with a “day by day and year by year confrontation with powerful external and internal forces, a bittersweet coming to terms with one’s personality and one’s life” (“Why Survive” 1).³²

For David, the process of his adaptation and the forms of historical awareness that attend it follow from his recognition that one cannot relate to others on the basis of shared history (or even shared memory). These thoughts take shape in the long wake of an attack that has exposed him to the impotence and insignificance of his own explanatory models. As a result, David’s focus on ethical and political *positions*, and the capacity for abstract thought that animates them, gives way to a mere necessity for care and attention at the end of life, a fact associated with his increasing commitment to the work at the animal

³² David, like his creator, is learning how to live out his own condition as a late representative of empire. In an interview with Derek Attwell, Coetzee describes his condition as follows:

In the time that is left to me it may be more productive to live out the question than to try to answer it in abstract terms. When I say I have lived out’ the question I mean I have lived it out not only in day-to-day life but in my fiction as well. As you see, I do not treat the creation of fiction, that is to say the invention and development of fantasies, as a form of abstract thought. I don’t wish to deny the uses of the intellect, but sometimes one has the intuition that by itself that the intellect by itself will lead one nowhere. (Attwell “Interview”)

David’s changing understanding of old age, which replaces the one-time act of death with a more involved and adaptive process, speaks to his new understanding of old age.

shelter. Within the medical community this form of attention is described as palliative care: a form of care that, recognizing its limits, doesn't seek to address the underlying cause or to render a cure but, instead, to reduce the immediate state of suffering.

Palliation is an integral theme in Coetzee's work. In "As a Woman Grows Older," a short fictional piece published in the *New York Review of Books*, Costello's daughter offers to hold her mother's hand on her deathbed. And *Diary of a Bad Year* ends with one of the most recognizable scenes of palliative care, as Anya, the beautiful young secretary who disagrees with John when it comes to the limits of shame, imagines what she will do for John C in his last moments. She will be there for him at the end without the hope of getting anything in return. The novel ends with Anya's promise to "hold his hand tight and give him a kiss on the brow, a proper kiss, just to remind him of what he is leaving behind. Good night, SENOR C, I will whisper in his ear: Sweet dreams, and flights of angels, and all the rest" (227). And Bev Shaw in *Disgrace* justifies the attention she gives the animals being euthanized as follows: "I don't think we are ready to die, any of us, not without being escorted" (84). This form of attention, which David comes to identify as a form of love, displaces his earlier relation to the world. No longer consumed with generating lasting solutions to interminable problems, nor with seeking to restore ways of life that are no longer tenable, David directs his focus towards the unwanted and the unloved animals in the "new" South Africa. Palliation rather than politics, I want to suggest, might be all that remains for these late representative of empire.³⁴

³⁴ At the end of *Disgrace*, Lucy, unlike her father, is able to separate herself from her family and her culture and take up a position within a miscegenated South Africa. Bev Shaw describes Lucy's willingness to change as an effect of her youth and her gender. "Lucy is adaptable," Bev tells David towards the end of the novel, "And she is young. She lives closer to the ground than you. Than either of us" (210). While "Lucy may be able to bend to the tempest," he says at the end of the novel, "he cannot, not with honor" (209). Being "closer to the ground" gets at the reconfigured universalism at stake here, since it is an

It is useful here to contrast the way in which *Disgrace* describes the aftermath of complicity and elaborates a solution with the way in which similar themes are handled in *Elizabeth Costello*. A formal feature in *Disgrace*, complicity becomes constitutive of the character of Elizabeth Costello. Where *Disgrace* is a novel that emphasizes the impossibility of innocence and the ongoing pressure exerted by the past on the present, *Elizabeth Costello* folds a general condition of lateness into a singular consciousness. Where Costello sees too much to look away, Coetzee's aging male protagonists usually begin from of a position of what Peter McDonald describes as his "patriarchal blindness" and comes to develop a form of limited site by the end (329). For Costello, late life involves a desperate attempt not to become a bystander refusing to take responsibility for the violence taking place in her midst. Taking her cue from Primo Levi, who describes the bystander as those Germans who, during the Hitlerian years, believed "that not seeing was a way of not knowing, and that not knowing relieved them of their share of complicity or connivance," Costello repeatedly aligns the experience of late life with the inability to look away from the fact of suffering in the world. In this way, the process of growing old resonates with Levi's account of the inmates who were "denied the screen of willed ignorance...were not able *not* to see" (DS 85-86). Instead of being released from complicity, with age, the septuagenarian Australian writer becomes increasingly aware of it and confused by it. Watching her children and grandchildren eat meat, Elizabeth, as an advocate for animal rights, finds herself mired in ambiguity. To explain her confusion, Costello, in a conversation with her son, draws a comparison to the Holocaust:

equality in the shared, fundamental experiences of life, death, and suffering that extend across species as much as gender or nation.

‘It is as if I were to visit friends, and to make some polite remark about the lamp in the living room, and they were to say, “Yes, it’s nice, isn’t it? Polish-Jewish skin it’s made of, we find that’s the best, the skins of young Polish-Jewish virgins.” And then I go to the bathroom and the soap wrapper says, “Treblinka – 100% human stearate.” Am I dreaming, I say to myself? What kind of house is this? Yet I know I’m not dreaming. I look into your eyes, into Norma’s, into the children’s, and I see only kindness, human kindness. Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you? *Why can’t you?*

The passage draws attention to Elizabeth’s inability to find a clear demarcation between what she knows is her family’s kindness and the evidence of murder brazenly displayed within their home.³⁵

For Costello, the difficulty in coming to terms with this situation, in accepting that a measure of violence is an inevitable part of life, is tightly linked to the fact of her advancing age. With age, Costello finds herself increasingly unable to categorize sufferings along hierarchical lines:

³⁵ The presence of such incommensurate realities, and the ambiguity and disorientation that follows in its wake, looks back to Primo Levi’s brief account of the soccer match in Auschwitz between members of the SS and SK. Debarti Sanyal reads the scene as a simulation of the camp’s structure and a symbol of its investment in universal guilt, quite literally makes sport of the incontrovertible distinction between executioners and victims. It illustrates the gray zone’s function as an aporetic space where extreme and norm converge and where victims, perpetrators, and witnesses seem to exchange positions with the fluidity of a soccer ball’s course on the village green. (Sanyal 2).

In *Elizabeth Costello*, the confusion generated by the soccer match is compared to the confusion generated by her families eating practices. Costello’s inability to distinguish between family and foe looks back to the kind of experiences that Levi sought to generate through his description of the gray zone in his last work.

A measuring of vileness against vileness in which the very act of measuring leaves a vile taste in the mouth, Twenty million, six million, three million, a hundred thousand: at a certain point the mind breaks down before quanta; and the older you get – this at any rate is what happened to her – the sooner comes the breakdown. A sparrow knocked off a branch by slingshot, a city annihilated from the air: who dare say which is worse?
(159)

The aging mind struggles to create hierarchies of suffering based on “quanta” or the identities of the victims, a struggle that leaves Elizabeth unable to distinguish between the murder of single sparrow and the destruction of a city’s population. Where David gains his awareness of suffering slowly, quietly, over the course of the novel, Elizabeth in these passages is alarmed and vocal. Both characters might be said to be learning how to live out their conditions without the possibility of an obvious or neat political solution, and thus as late representatives of empire.

Both *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello* arguably imagine a literary alternative to what Michael Rothberg calls “competitive memory,” the ugly contest between competing memories of suffering that is the result of a “notion of the public sphere as a pre-given, limited space in which already established groups engage in a life-and-death struggle” (5). With everyone fighting for recognition, competitive memory results in a zero-sum game of competition. This has been especially true with regards to Holocaust memory. The defenders of Holocaust memory, says Rothberg, “assiduously search out and refute all attempts to compare or analogize the Holocaust in order to preserve memory of the Shoah from its dilution or relativization” (9). These efforts to protect Holocaust memory

can deflect any and all attention away from thinking about the relation between different histories of suffering. Pushing back against this competitive model, Rothberg argues for a form of “multidirectional memory,” which is “meant to draw attention to the dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance. These forms of comparative (rather than competitive) thinking allow us to think beyond the “sacrosanct border of ethnicity and era,” and to consider instead what these histories have in common and how they interact (17).

The experiences of lateness and aging as understood here seem like a powerful antidote to the forms of competitive memory that trouble Rothberg. Such competition, and the hierarchy of sufferings it generates, collapses, with age, into a more general awareness of the universality of suffering and dependency, an awareness disarticulated from specific identities, cultures, or species, while the weakening of one’s own capacities can give rise to a willingness to engage with the suffering and needs of others. David’s palliative attention, for example, suggests an understanding of essential fragility that links him to the dogs.

This move, as Rothberg attests, is especially difficult for Jewish writers, and in particular for survivors, who remain very much concerned with the suffering of the Jews and with the preservation of Jewish memory and identity. Coetzee’s interest in multidirectional memory places him, then, at something of a remove from the other writers in this study. Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, and J.M. Coetzee are each responding to, even interrogating, the demand for historical reckoning. Roth and Bellow use the experience of late life in order to reckon with the aging and death of the community of Holocaust survivors, while Coetzee, focusing on late representatives of empire, engages

with the process of atoning for crimes committed in one's name. Coetzee, however, in charting the turn to ethical practices, and through an awareness of the universality of suffering, is also charting territory that reinscribes a kind of humane universalism that recalls Primo Levi's deeply humanist commitments.

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CURRICULUM VITA

Anthony Wexler was born on May 13th, 1978 in Montreal, Canada. He studied English literature, psychology and religious studies at Yeshiva University in New York, before entering the Ph.D. program in English at Johns Hopkins University. He is currently the Alexander Gross Memorial Fellow at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.