

## MEMORY AND HISTORY: LITURGICAL TIME AND HISTORICAL TIME

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates the differential structure and representation of time in memory and history. It examines two moments in Jewish historical thought—in the Middle Ages, and in works written within and after the Holocaust—and demonstrates the fundamentally liturgical nature of Jewish historical memory in selected texts from these two periods. Following the groundbreaking work of Yerushalmi, it seeks to demonstrate that for Jews, historical experience is incorporated into the cyclical reenactment of paradigmatic events in Jewish sacred ritual. Recent or contemporary experiences acquire meaning only insofar as they can be subsumed within Biblical categories of events and their interpretation bequeathed to the community through the medium of Scripture, that is to say, only insofar as they can be transfigured, ritually and liturgically, into repetitions and reenactments of ancient happening. In such liturgical commemoration, the past exists only by means of recitation; the fundamental goal of such recitation is to make it live again in the present, to fuse past and present, chanter and hearer, into a single collective entity. History, in the sense that we understand it to consist of unique events unfolding within irreversible linear time, is absorbed into cyclical, liturgical memory.

This article argues that the question of Jewish history—both medieval and post-Holocaust—poses in a compelling fashion the question of the relationship between memory and history more generally, and serves to contest the current tendency in academic historiography to collapse history into memory. It claims that to the extent that memory “resurrects,” “re-cycles,” and makes the past “reappear” and live again in the present, it cannot perform historically, since it refuses to keep the past in the past, to draw the line, as it were, that is constitutive of the modern enterprise of historiography.

### I

This article is the fruit of a decade-long meditation on the problem of history and memory. Although it is largely concerned to demonstrate the properties of memory, the stakes for historiography seem to me clear and compelling. I believe that the turn to memory so pervasive in academic circles today forms part of an attempt to recuperate presence in history—a form of backlash against postmodernist/poststructuralist thought, with its insistence on the mediated, indeed constructed, nature of all knowledge, and most especially knowledge of the past. In this sense, I am tempted to claim that memory has displaced deconstruction as the *lingua franca* of cultural studies. Memory, by becoming virtually hypostatized as a historical agent (one hears talk of how “archives remember,” of how

monuments are materialized embodiments of memorial consciousness, and the like), makes it possible to essentialize and hypostatize the “reality” which it narrates. It is here that memory’s close affinity to oral recitation makes the point so tellingly, for like oral recitation—whether of poetry or prayer—it lays claim to a gestural vividness and presumptive presence and presentness (a *jetztzeit* [presence of the *now*] to borrow Benjamin’s terminology) that seems to open itself to the return of metaphysics, metaphysics understood, that is, in the Derridean sense of onto-ontology, that is, the metaphysics of presence.

Paradoxically, it is precisely those with the greatest investment in deconstruction, of the de Manian if not Derridean sort, who are most deeply engaged in work on memory—Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth spring readily to mind, not to mention Dominick LaCapra, for whom memory functions in a way very similar to his earlier deployment of deconstruction and theory. It is here, as Kerwin Klein points out in an exemplary article “On the Emergence of *Memory* in Historical Discourse,”<sup>1</sup> that the “notorious vagaries” of memory become its strengths: its partial, fragmented, transient, and allusive nature become a kind of trope of memory that proposes itself both as a counter-historiographical force—“history” being understood in the traditional sense of “objective,” formalized, and institutionalized modes of understanding and interpretation associated with the “modern” (nineteenth-century, positivist and cognitive modernism)—and the newest embodiment of a historical consciousness characteristic of postmodernism, a Foucauldian discursive field available for analysis as part of the genealogy of the modern soul.

A word on the somewhat odd intellectual strategies of this article is perhaps also in order. I have chosen to present the issue of history and memory through two readings of Jewish memory—that of archaic Jewish memory and that of post-Holocaust memory. The choice of the former was determined by my sense that no clearer case for the sacral and auratic quality of memory, one least tinged by historical thought, can be found in the direct Western tradition. In addition, I believe that it highlights some fundamental features of post-Holocaust memory that have been occluded by the rush to valorize memory as an alternative historiographical discourse.

The reason to do post-Holocaust historiography—and I stress that I am dealing with the implications of post-Holocaust historiographical consciousness on the practice of history, *not* with how the history of the Holocaust or the camps is written—is because of the way that the Holocaust put to rest, finally and forever, at least in the minds of many, a Western, modernist, progressive, and ultimately optimistic view of history. In that sense, the Holocaust has been critically important, I and others have argued, for the emergence of what we now conventionally call postmodernism. Moreover, discourse on the Holocaust, with its tendency to privilege questions of memory and, not least, trauma, has been the seedbed of the growing industry devoted to these topics, which have now generalized themselves to virtually every field in the profession. Since I believe that

1. *Representations* 69 (2000), 127-150.

the medieval exemplars of Jewish memory help us to understand more clearly the place of memory in post-Holocaust thought and historiography, and thus to think our way through the problem of memory and history in a more precise way, the strategy of the article is to use the one to decode the other.

The final section explores Pierre Nora's account of memory and relates it to Michel de Certeau's understanding of historiography. This final section on Nora and de Certeau results from my conviction that precisely to the extent that the concern with memory has become general, any case for or against its utility in historiography has to take into account not only traumatic memory, but "normal" memory and normative historiography as well. To deal with memory and history solely from the point of view of traumatic memory is to so distort the historiographical issues that it prevents us from seeing the ways in which ideas of traumatic memory have infiltrated—not necessarily to good effect—our understanding both of normal memory and routine historiography. This final section, then, draws out the implications of the current tendency to substitute memory for history as they apply to the broader field of historiography proper.

## II

In the early part of the sixteenth century, a Jewish scholar named Tam Ibn Yahia sponsored a new edition of *Yosippon*, an ancient book of Jewish history which treated the period of the Second Temple and which purported to be the work of Josephus (hence the title *Yosippon*), although in all likelihood it was a clerical adaptation written in tenth-century Byzantine Italy. When publishing the edition of 1510 in Constantinople, Tam Ibn Yahia sought to guarantee to his prospective readers the authenticity of this ancient text by assuring them that

Although it is characteristic of historical works to exaggerate things that never were, to add to them, to invent things that never existed; nevertheless, this book (*Yosippon*), although it is part of the same genre, is completely distinct from them, and it is the difference between truth and falsehood. For all the words of this book are righteousness and truth, and there is no wrong within it. And the mark of all this is that of all the books written after the Holy Scripture, this one is closest to prophecy. . . .<sup>2</sup>

For Tam Ibn Yahia it is, thus, prophecy that underwrites the validity and truthfulness of a proper account of the Jewish past. Moreover, one would not be wrong to see in his admonishments to the reader a faint but discernible reflection of a more general Jewish posture towards the past in the Middle Ages, a posture that stipulated that memory, not history, prophets, not historians, figure as the chief bearers and custodians of the historical experience of the Jews.

As Yosef Yerushalmi has demonstrated in his brilliant investigation of Jewish historical thought, *Zakhor*, from which I quote the text of Ibn Yahia, throughout the Middle Ages the Jewish preoccupation with the meaning of history was absorbed into the commemorative practices of the synagogue, while historiogra-

2. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 35-36.

phy, the writing of history, played at best an ancillary, and for the most part no, role at all in the preservation and explanation of the community's shared historical traditions. For medieval Jews, memory flowed, above all, through two channels: ritual and recital. The fact that there is no Jewish history, not even of the kind recorded in the Old Testament, after the destruction of the Second Temple, indicates how tightly bound up was historical consciousness and historiographical practice in the Middle Ages with continuous social and political structures. The social dispersion of the Jews in the Diaspora cut their consciousness of history off from any immediate political frame, and caused their historical energies to become entirely expended in a ritual reenactment of what constituted, for the Jews of the Diaspora, a privileged moment of historical identity associated with a distant, and scripturally revealed, past. As a written tradition, Jewish history became incorporated into the rabbinic study of *halakhah* (jurisprudence), for which it provided a warehouse of occasionally useful *exempla* and applications.

What the passage from Tam Ibn Yahia's introduction to *Yosippon* suggests, and the "loss of Jewish history" in the Middle Ages confirms, is the highly problematical nature of any historical enterprise in a Biblical culture in which history must compete with a revealed past, believed to enshrine all the really important norms of human conduct. For the Rabbis, the Bible "was not only a repository of past history, but a revealed pattern of the whole of history."<sup>3</sup> More recent or contemporary occurrences acquired meaning only insofar as they could be subsumed within Biblical categories of events and their interpretation bequeathed to the community through the medium of Scripture, that is to say, only insofar as they could be transfigured, ritually and liturgically, into repetitions and reenactments of ancient happenings. In that sense, the weight of Jewish memory blocked, as Pierre Vidal-Naquet has written, "history from exercising its rights."<sup>4</sup> Although the historical events of the biblical period remain unique and irreversible, psychologically they are experienced cyclically, repetitively, and hence atemporally. In liturgical commemoration, as in poetic oral recitation, the fundamental goal is, precisely, to revivify the past and make it live in the present, to fuse past and present, chanter and hearer, priest and observer, into a single collective entity. The written text, when it represents a transcription of a once-live recital, commemorates both the past which is sung *about* and the performance itself. History, in the sense that we understand it to consist of unique events unfolding within an irreversible linear time, is absorbed into cyclical, liturgical memory.

This posture towards the past was central to Jews throughout the Middle Ages. Yerushalmi indicates how even the most disastrous of contemporary events—massacres, expulsions, pogroms, and so on—were coded as but pale recapitulations of such primary biblical moments as Exodus. One finds it, for example, in the initial historiographical response to the massacres of Jews in 1096, during the

3. *Ibid.*, 21. See also *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Harim Yerushalmi*, ed. Elisheva Carlebach, John M. Efron, and David N. Meyers (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 1998).

4. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *The Jews: History, Memory and the Present*, transl. and ed. David Ames Curtis (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 57.

First Crusade. The *Hebrew Crusade Chronicles* which recount those events adopt traditional Jewish modes of inserting events into the sort of transcendent, liturgically inflected scheme with which we have become familiar since the publication of *Zakhor*, thereby projecting the events of 1096 onto the exalted plane of paradigmatic Jewish historical experience.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the narratives of the massacre of Rhineland Jews and their self-slaughter (that is, suicide) in the face of forced conversion, events of the present are subsumed within the categories supplied by traditional, liturgically commemorated aspects of the Jewish past: the destruction of the two Temples (*Hurban*, in Yiddish), the Binding (or sacrifice) of Isaac (*Akeda*), and the sanctification of the Name of God—that is, martyrdom (*Kiddush Hashem*).

Scholars who have worked on these texts, such as Ivan Marcus<sup>6</sup> and Jeremy Cohen,<sup>7</sup> insist on their metaphorical and literary character. Jeremy Cohen, for example, believes the texts serve the interests of the survivor generation to such an extent that “their contents offer negligible insight into the actual behavior of Ashkenazic Jews during those events,” while Marcus goes so far as to interpret the events themselves as ritualizations of metaphor, subsequently reinscribed in the cultural terms of their twelfth-century literary context. Cohen has also underscored the caustic, parodic irony, as well as the profound ambivalence, that characterizes these writings, giving rise to a “poetics of sacrilege” that consoles even as it borders on blasphemy. Here, the literal recall of ancient analogues (for example, the Temple Cult analogue) provides the locus of a vast primal destruction in the remote but accessible past that contextualizes, disciplines, and codifies the tribulations of the present. As Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi explains, sacred parody arises as authors deploy an

ironizing appropriation of the consecrated past or of constitutive texts that still manages to preserve their normative valence. By incorporating anger, and even blasphemy into the normative response to catastrophe, the language of sacred parody remains contained yet infinitely expandable; scriptural and liturgical texts are appropriated while registering the enormity of the violation of central precepts.<sup>8</sup>

5. For the texts see Robert Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), Appendix. There is extensive debate on the Chronicles and their status as history. See Robert Chazan, “The Hebrew First-Crusade Chronicles,” *Revue des Etudes Juives* 133 (1974), 237-254; *idem*, “The Hebrew First Crusade Chronicles: Further Reflections,” *AJS Review* 3 (1978), 79-98; Ivan Marcus, “History, Story and Collective Memory: Narrativity in Early Ashkenazic Culture,” *Prooftexts* 10 (1990), 365-388; *idem*, “The Representation of Reality in the Narratives of 1096,” *Jewish History* 13 (1999), 1-13; *idem*, “Text, History and Memory: The 1096 Hebrew Narratives,” paper presented at the meeting of the American Historical Association, San Francisco, 1994; S. Eidelberg, “The Solomon Bar Simon Chronicle as a Source of the History of the First Crusade,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* n.s. 49 (1959), 282-287; Anna Sapir Abulafia, “The Interrelationship between the Hebrew Chronicles on the First Crusade,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 27/2 (1982), 221-239.

6. “Text, History and Memory: The 1096 Hebrew Narratives.”

7. “The Hebrew Crusade Chronicles in the Twelfth-Century Cultural Context,” paper presented at the meeting of the American Historical Association, San Francisco, 1994.

8. Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, “Considering the Apocalypse: Is the Writing on the Wall only Graffiti?” in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (Ithaca, N. Y.: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 141.

## III

I have placed these medieval exemplars of Jewish historiography on the table, so to speak, not so much because of their intrinsic interest (although they don't lack interest). Rather, I offer them as distant, past enactments of a very contemporary dilemma which bears centrally on my concern with history, memory, and time, namely the nature of historical writing in the wake of the Holocaust, a problem engendered by, but not limited to, historical writing on the Holocaust.

The Holocaust has become in recent historiography both the absolute reference point for the truth of history, and the limit-case of historical representation. As Dan Diner notes:

Auschwitz is a no-man's land of the mind, a black box of explanation; it sucks in all historiographic attempts at interpretation, it is a vacuum taking meaning only from outside history [Theology/liturgy]. Only *ex negativo*, only through the constant attempt to understand why it cannot be understood, can we measure what sort of occurrence this breach of civilization really was. As the most extreme of extreme cases, and thus as the absolute measure of history, this event is hardly historicizable.<sup>9</sup>

In this respect, it is interesting that the tendency to immerse the past in liturgical time and memory represents both the first and, to some extent, the persistent response on the part of Jews to the Holocaust. As David Roskies has shown,<sup>10</sup> Jewish chroniclers writing during the events of the Holocaust themselves created what he has called the "modern Library of Jewish Catastrophe," a literature of destruction that, in contrast to the European and Anglo-American literature of war, continued to present the catastrophe in terms of the ancient archetypes of *Akedah*, *Hurban*, and *Kiddush Hashem*.<sup>11</sup>

What is perhaps most surprising about this development is that it does not represent the Jews' original intention. On the contrary, the impulse to preserve a decidedly "modern library" of Jewish life in a strictly factual account had moved Emmanuel Ringelblum, then thirty-nine, to establish *Oneg Shabbes* (Enjoyment of the Sabbath) in the midst of the Warsaw ghetto. In so doing, he followed a pattern established by S. Ansky during World War I to chronicle the mass extermination of Ukrainian Jews, and carried on by the YIVO institute [the Yiddish Scientific Institute] in Vilna, the historical section of which Ringelblum had helped to set up, serving as the chairman of its Young Historians Circle. Ringelblum hired professional—secularly trained—historians to record every possible aspect of Jewish life in Warsaw, thus breaking "with the time-honored practice that favored archetypal embellishment over temporal details, sacred text over historical context."<sup>12</sup> For Ringelblum, this strict factual account would tell

9. Dan Diner, "Historical Understanding and Counterrationality: The *Judenrat* as Epistemological Vantage," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 128.

10. David G. Roskies, "The Library of Jewish Catastrophe," in *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 33-41.

11. See also Annette Wieviorka, "On Testimony," in Hartman, ed., *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, 32.

12. Roskies, "The Library of Jewish Catastrophe," 38.

its own story, or rather stories, replacing the rabbinic strategy of preserving only one, timeless, version of events—endlessly repeated and recycled—for the concrete, diverse, and multifocal record of his host of writers. Sociologically and statistically sophisticated, almost obsessively positivist in orientation, Ringelblum felt the need to compile, record, and preserve every scrap of evidence relating to the history of Jewish destruction in Warsaw as a sacred task, a channelling of the age-old memorializing impulse into new paths. Thus Chaim Kaplan, part of the *Oneg Shabbes* group, recorded in the dairy that he kept (later published as *The Warsaw Diary of Chaim Kaplan*) his desire to “write a scroll of agony to remember the past in the future,”<sup>13</sup> taking upon himself the role of the Jewish scribe-remembrancers of old. Kaplan’s *Diary*, Ringelblum’s *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, and the similarly inspired *Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto* were new kinds of Jewish “memory books,” marrying modern techniques of secular historiography with ancient traditions of sacred recall.

However, once the genuinely catastrophic nature of the unfolding events became clear—as it did with the Great Deportation in the summer of 1942, when 275,000 Jews were shipped off to Treblinka in cattle cars—the chroniclers of the Warsaw Ghetto reverted to traditional models of commemoration, that is, to the liturgy, “for what unlocked the memory of those weeks of unsurpassed terror and enabled them to write,” in Roskies’s opinion, “was the liturgy.” In this way, the “modern Library of Jewish catastrophe” “both grew out of Jewish collective memory and fed back into it. To the ancient and medieval songs of lament, prayers and dirges were added panoramic chronicles written in the first person but encompassing the fate of the collective.”<sup>14</sup> Even in the work of a non-observant, secular, and assimilated writer like Rachel Auerbach, author of “*Yizkor*”-1943, the voice of Jewish history becomes a song of threnody, a new book of lamentations for unbelievers, having recourse to and reviving, despite the loss of faith, archetypal readings of history, thereby reestablishing a sense of connection with the past that promised, by analogy, the continuity of Jewish life.<sup>15</sup>

In a similar fashion, Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi demonstrates that, at least originally, the typical Jewish response to the Holocaust was mythicization, collectivization, ritualization—in short all the processes that would embed the particular within the general and surrender the individual to the community, thereby endowing the narrative of the Shoah with a meaningful, life-affirming closure. Such traditional liturgical, mnemonic absorption of the Holocaust was also the initial native Israeli response to the Holocaust (that is, not that written by survivors, but by Israelis or second-generation Jews born/living in Israel), an attempt, at bottom, to “normalize” it, at least within the particular governing paradigms of Jewish historical consciousness.<sup>16</sup> The same motives inspired the

13. Cited in Alvin Rosenfeld, “Jean Améry as Witness,” in Hartman, ed., *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, 59.

14. Roskies, “The Library of Jewish Catastrophe,” 35.

15. See Sara Horowitz, “Voices from the Killing Ground,” in Hartman, ed., *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, 53.

16. Dekoven Ezrahi, “Considering the Apocalypse: Is the Writing on the Wall only Graffiti?” 229.

Israeli Knesset when in 1951 it chose 27 Nissan as *Yom ha-Shoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day), a day selected, they explained, to commemorate the heroism of ghetto fighters who had initiated the Warsaw uprising, and which had the added advantage of falling near the date of the massacres of Jews by Crusaders in 1096.<sup>17</sup> The effect of this choice was to insert Holocaust remembrance into the historical sequence of Jewish catastrophes and the calendar of its life-cycle, leading to the “redemptive” birth of a Jewish state. Indeed, the very name “Holocaust” (meaning “burnt offering”) implies that this event lies within the cyclical paradigm of liturgical memory, for the name itself enacts the liturgical recycling of the past. It seems hardly accidental, from this perspective, that at Yad Vashem—on exiting the exhibition dedicated to the memory of the *Shoah*—there is a sign that reads:

Forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of redemption

For many post-Holocaust Jews, who as much as anyone have encountered the terrors of history, memory remains the bearer of meaning, the vehicle of identity, and the promise of transcendence. *Zakhor*, the call to remembrance, thus constitutes an enduring attempt to escape the burden of history by locating communal identity in a memory that, in its immersion in liturgical time, paradoxically holds out the possibility of redemption in the face of an event that—almost everyone would agree—appears to deny its very possibility.

Only with the survivors themselves did the notion of the inexpressibility—hence unintelligibility—of the Holocaust appear. Both among survivors and the generations that have followed, the passage of time seems to have eroded redemptive meanings, giving way to the sense of producing a fugitive narrative of catastrophe, or what Maurice Blanchot has called a “disaster notation” (*écriture de désastre*).<sup>18</sup> And yet the question of memory will not go away, but persists as a central issue in Holocaust literature and historiography. In part this can be explained in terms of the memorial tradition here reviewed, but more saliently, I think, because the Nazi extermination of the Jews was also, as Primo Levi called the Holocaust, a “War on Memory,” an attempt to eradicate not only the persons of Jews but all traces of their existence, to envelope Jewish history and tradition within a blanket of silence and secrecy. Survivors, we know, often describe themselves as *geheimnistäger*, the “bearers of a secret” never to be told, a silent (silenced) secret generated within the Event itself, as evidenced by Himmler’s now famous Speech to the SS at Posen in 1943, in which he lauded the project of extermination as “a glorious page in our history which has never been written and never will be written.”<sup>19</sup> Thus apart from its genocidal aims, what distinguished the Nazi crime against the Jews was, as Alvin Rosenfeld has written, “the intent

17. Saul Friedlander, *Memory, History and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1993), 44.

18. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, transl. Ann Smock (Lincoln, Neb. and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

19. *Ein niemals geschriebenes und niemals zu schreibendes Ruhmesblatt unserer Geschichte*. Quoted in Peter Haidu, “The Dialectics of Unspeakability,” in Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 286.



of the criminals to leave behind no witness, and hence, no record at all.”<sup>20</sup> The Holocaust was to be a total, silent deed, Himmler’s blank page of history, a final erasure of the past accompanying the final solution. Given this, and given the continuation of that effort at erasure in Revisionism or, as the French more accurately call it, “Negationism” (that is, the denial of the gas chambers),<sup>21</sup> it is hardly surprising that post-Holocaust historiography and literature have become focused on the question of testimony—on witnessing—and thus, inevitably, once again with memory (albeit of a very different kind), since witnessing entails the operation of memory.

Testimony—the eyewitness account—either as quasi-judicial or historical act or as a linguistic/literary genre, necessarily substitutes narrative for perception. But precisely because it derives from the eyewitness account it offers the impression (the illusion?) of standing closer to “that which was seen” and now reported, than does history, a discourse drafted from other discourses. Indeed, as Annette Wieviorka recently insisted, the purpose of Holocaust testimony “is no longer to obtain knowledge . . . to bear witness to inadequately known events, but rather to keep them before our eyes.”<sup>22</sup> This specular function of testimony—placing it in a *theatrum mundi* à la Baudrillard—holds out the promise of a certain emotional and gestural vividness—a vividness strongly reinforced by the customarily oral form of its delivery—that operates to transform testimony into a virtually transparent form of transmission (signifying a return of presence, as it were). This promise is deceptive: the form of testimony occludes the fact that one cannot show and speak at the same time, and hence occludes the narrative dimension intrinsic to memory, often defined at its most simple level as the narrativization of past experience.<sup>23</sup> So extreme has this validation of testimony become in recent years that Shoshana Felman feels able to assert that testimony, as it appears, for example, in Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*—widely praised as the most significant example of the power of Holocaust testimony—*makes* “truth happen as a testimony through the haunting repetition of an ill-understood melody; [*makes*] the referent come back, paradoxically, as something heretofore unseen by history; [*reveals*] the real. . . .”<sup>24</sup> Holocaust testimony, on this account, emerges as the critical bearer of the “truth” of the past, a bulwark against revisionism and its politics of forgetting, and a critical resource for history which demands, as Vidal-Naquet repeatedly and passionately insists, that the work of memory be integrated into the work of the historian.

20. Rosenfeld, “Jean Améry as Witness,” in Hartman, ed., *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, 59.

21. On revisionism in France see especially Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust*, transl. with a foreword by Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

22. Wieviorka, “On Testimony,” in Hartman, ed., *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, 24.

23. Pierre Janet, for example, in *L'évolution de la mémoire et de la notion du temps* (Paris: A. Chahine, 1928) regarded the fundamental mnemonic act to be “the conduct of the story.”

24. Shoshana Felman, “The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*,” in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 276.

Yet it has always seemed to me that all work on the Holocaust has labored under the double-binding injunction perhaps best articulated by Elie Wiesel: “Never Forget/ you can never know.” As Primo Levi indicated, even the survivor does not know the “truth “ of the Holocaust, a truth reserved, he claimed, for the *muselmanns*, for the dead. The world of Auschwitz, in George Steiner’s famous remark, “lies outside speech as its lies outside reason.”<sup>25</sup> In the writings of perhaps the greatest poet of these years, Paul Celan, language stutters on the edge of silence, words choke, the voice suffocates. As rarely before, poetry, says Steiner, “is tempted by silence.”<sup>26</sup>

Those who have studied Holocaust memory, like Lawrence Langer, speak more often of the “ruins of memory” than of its recuperation. Langer distinguishes between a “deep memory” totally centered on the years of the *Shoah*, and a “common memory” that belongs to normal pre- and post-camp routines, and which offers what he calls “detached portraits” from the vantage point of today, of what it might have been like.<sup>27</sup> “Deep memory”—the traumatized, quasi-repressed but (often violently ) recursive memory of the victims—cannot be reduced, translated into, common memory. “Deep memory” escapes the efforts at normalization (hence narrativization) that common memory seeks to impose in the interest of building a coherent survivor “self.” That self is, therefore, itself often unaware of all deep memory’s meanings and consequences.

For our purposes, equally notable is that this double structure of Holocaust memory is accompanied by a double structure of time, which Langer<sup>28</sup> recently has designated as a split between “chronological time,” the time of the historian’s frames of passage, and what he calls “durational time,” enclosing “a past located this side of the forgotten, much closer to the present moment than any past, yet incapable of being solicited by voluntary and conscious memory.”<sup>29</sup> What durational time contains has always been there, suspended atemporally, not to be “recovered” but only uncovered and then covered once more, buried again beneath the fruitless struggle to expose “the way it was.”<sup>30</sup> Thus the Israeli poet Abraham Sutzkever, a survivor of the Vilna ghetto, describes himself in the poem “Burnt Pearls,” written in 1943, as a poet “shredded by time.”<sup>31</sup> Like the doctor in Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*, the survivor has before him only his past. Indeed, in Steiner’s view, Auschwitz signifies “the death of man as a rational, forward-dreaming speech organism.”<sup>32</sup> “Durational time,” Langer stipulates,

25. George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1986), 123.

26. *Ibid.*, 7.

27. Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991). See also Saul Friedlander, “Trauma, Transference and ‘Working Through’ in Writing the History of the *Shoah*,” *History and Memory: Studies in the Representation of the Past* 4 (1992), 40.

28. Lawrence Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

29. See Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews,”* transl. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts, intro. by David Carroll (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 12.

30. Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust*, 15.

31. Reprinted in Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust*, 59.

32. George Steiner, “The Long Life of Metaphor: An Approach to the Shoah,” in Lang, ed., *Writing and the Holocaust*, 156.

does not allow for any sort of foreclosure toward the past; *its* foreclosure expels the future, a lingering that refuses incorporation into the evanescent flow of chronological time.<sup>33</sup> Durational time resists precisely the closure—the putting an end to the past—that chronological/historical time necessarily effects; durational time persists as a past that will not pass, hence as a past always present. Thus, while Holocaust testimonies may impart the illusion of chronology, in effect their durational structure defeats any attempt at historicization; they are, therefore, *structurally* unavailable as history.

If Holocaust “deep memory” is only just accessible to those who possess it, if the “truth” of the Holocaust escapes all but the dead, if the most powerful testimony to it resides in silence or the broken language of a Paul Celan, and if its fractured temporal structure rebukes coherence and closure, what purchase can the historian hope to achieve on its testimonial remains and hence on their meaning for history? Before we bow to an overly facile identification of testimony with history—à la Felman, Caruth,<sup>34</sup> and a host of others—we would do well to remember Lanzmann’s own insistence, recorded at a conference at Yale University, that *Shoah*

is certainly not a historical film . . . the purpose of *Shoah* is not to transmit knowledge, in spite of the fact that there is knowledge in the film. . . . *Shoah* is not a historical film, it is something else . . . to condense in one word what the film is for me, I would say [in a surprisingly Christian lexicon, I am tempted to point out] that the film in an *incarnation*, a *resurrection*. . . .<sup>35</sup>

To underscore this return of presence via resurrection and reincarnation, it is noteworthy that, in a passage far less often cited, Lanzmann asserts that the film is no more memory than history:

The film was not made with memories, I knew it immediately. Memory horrifies me; memory is weak. The film is the destruction of all distance between past and present. . . .<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, says, Lanzmann, “the whole meaning of the film is that things are presented for our view in a sort of hallucinatory intemporality, or rather, atemporality.”<sup>37</sup> Hence, as in traditional forms of Jewish ritual, the goal of the film is pure present transmission, to accomplish what Lanzmann calls “the whole work of rememoration,” a memorial task almost impossible, in this construction, to differentiate from the traditional call to *Zahkor*.

33. Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust*, 22.

34. See Cathy Caruth, “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History,” *Yale French Studies* 79 (1991), 181-192 and *idem*, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

35. Cited in Shoshana Felman, “Film as Witness: Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*,” in Hartman, ed., *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, 97.

36. “Le film n’est pas fait avec des souvenirs, je l’ai su tout de suite. Le souvenir me fait horreur: le souvenir est faible. Le film est l’abolition de toute distance entre le passé et le présent, j’ai revécu cette histoire au présent.” in “Le Lieu et la Parole,” in *Au Sujet de Shoah*, ed. Michel Deguy (Paris: Belin, 1990), 301.

37. Claude Lanzmann, “Les Non-Lieux de la Mémoire,” in M. Deguy, ed., *Au Sujet de Shoah*, 285.

## IV

The nature of Jewish history—both medieval and post-Holocaust—thus poses in a compelling fashion the question of the relationship between memory and history generally, a question that, as I indicated above, is to some extent engendered by, but certainly not limited to, the Holocaust. An obsession with questions of memory has swept the Academy at the moment (in the U.S. in any case), most often associated with work on the Holocaust but now spreading to fields as distant as the Middle Ages. So preponderant has the obsession with memory been in the last decade or so that already in 1993 Charles S. Maier was moved to query whether there was not a “surfeit of memory” to which, he believed, we have in some sense become addicted.<sup>38</sup>

Outside the field of Holocaust studies, perhaps the most influential strand of historiographically-oriented work on memory has been that done by, and under the direction of, Pierre Nora in France, whose interest in “realms of memory” has centered on *lieux de mémoire*, those putative “sites of memory” which function as bearers of collectively commemorated (and monumentalized) pasts, *loci—lieux*—in which images of the past crystallize inscribed meanings. I will not rehearse Nora’s arguments here. But it is worth emphasizing what too many historians appear to have forgotten: namely, that Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*, to the extent that they are grounded in a sense of rupture with the past—in this case the passing of a traditional agrarian regime in France—signify that “our relation to the past is no longer that of retrospective continuity, but the illumination of discontinuity.”<sup>39</sup> *Lieux de mémoire*, as Nora defines them, result precisely because of a conscious break with the past, one bound up with the sense that memory has been torn.<sup>40</sup> Thus the moment of *lieux de mémoire* occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as a “reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical history.”<sup>41</sup> “What we call memory today,” Nora insists, “is therefore not memory, but already history.”<sup>42</sup>

Because the argument I wish to make is that the current tendency to theorize a reciprocal conversion of memory into history and history into memory—whether of a traumatic or normative kind—simply will not work, and this because, at the very least, their differing temporal structures prohibit such a conflation, it is interesting to relate Nora’s view of *lieux de mémoire* to Michel de Certeau’s understanding of the modern discipline of historiography, which he, too, grounds in a sense of rupture with the past.<sup>43</sup> In de Certeau’s opinion, modern Western history essentially begins with a decisive differentiation between the

38. Charles S. Maier, “A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy and Denial,” *History and Memory* 5 (1993), 140.

39. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations* 26 (1989), 16.

40. *Ibid.*, 7.

41. *Ibid.*, 12.

42. *Ibid.*, 13.

43. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, transl. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

present and the past. Like modern medicine, whose birth is contemporaneous with that of modern historiography, the practice of history becomes possible only when a corpse is opened to investigation, made legible such that it can be translated into that which can be written within a space of language. Historians must draw a line between what is dead (past) and what is not, and therefore they posit death as a total social fact, in contrast to tradition, which figures a lived body of traditional knowledge, passed down in gestures, habits, unspoken but nonetheless real memories, borne by living societies. For de Certeau, as for Nora, the modern age entertains an obsessive relation with death, and discourse about the past has as the very condition of its possibility the status of being discourse about the dead, a discourse with which historians fill the void between past and present created by history's founding gesture of rupture. In that sense, the very postulate of modern historiography is the disappearance of the past from the present, its movement from visibility to invisibility. The historian's task becomes, therefore, what Hofmannsthal defined as that of "reading what was never written."<sup>44</sup> It is in this moment that the past is saved, "not in being returned to what once existed, but instead, precisely in being transformed into something that never was; in being 'read as what was never written.'"<sup>45</sup> The chief aim of modern historiography has become that of representing—rather than, as formerly, resurrecting—the past. Within the modern conspectus of history and memory, *lieux de mémoire* function as pure signs with no referent. Indeed, says Nora, all *lieux de mémoire* are objects *mise en abîme*; what makes them *lieux de mémoire* is precisely that by which they escape from history.

From this perspective, the current concern with memory transcends the strict question of memory itself, and can be linked to the more general preoccupation with language and discourse. What is at stake in the focus on memory, Maier notes, is the postmodern dissolution of social transparency. "Memory" has become an alternative format for language, functioning in the manner of discourse less as a medium for the reconstruction of the world than as a semi-opaque and self-referential activity. Thus, in Maier's view, with the "metastasis of discourse, the metastasis of memory was bound to occur as well; memory has become the discourse that replaces history."<sup>46</sup>

To so pose the present understanding of the relationship of memory to history has carried us very far from their initial opposition as figured in the liturgical, cyclical reenactment of paradigmatic events in medieval Jewish sacred ritual. But a critical distinction has been lost in this displacement from the sacred to the secular, from liturgy to history, the Middle Ages to the modern world. If memory is not the very antithesis of history, it nonetheless cannot be severed from its sacral

44. The phrase of Hofmannsthal is cited in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schwepenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–1989), vol. 1, pt. 3, 1238. I am indebted to Daniel Heller-Roazen for this reference.

45. See the discussion of this in Daniel Heller-Roazen, "Introduction," Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, ed. and transl. with an introduction by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1.

46. Maier, "A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy and Denial," 141 and 142.

and liturgical—its “commemorative”—contexts and made to do the “work” of history. To the extent that memory “reincarnates,” “resurrects,” “re-cycles,” and makes the past “reappear” and live again in the present, it cannot perform historically, since it refuses to keep the past in the past, to draw the line, as it were, that is constitutive of the modern enterprise of historiography. History re-presents the dead; memory re-members the corpse in order to revivify it. To be sure, memory as a social phenomenon forms part of the vast apparatus that civilizations construct to preserve the fragments of the past, but unlike the backward-gazing history, it faces forward from the living present to an imagined future. The one is oral, liturgical, and essentially prophetic; the other is written, archival, and essentially analytical. Holocaust testimony, monumentalized *lieux de mémoire*, museums, festivals, and the like are traces of the past that negate the sacred but seek to retain its aura. They are, as Nora has so powerfully demonstrated, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it.

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