Verses on Auschwitz:
Images of the Holocaust in Modern American Poetry

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts in English
at the University of Cape Town

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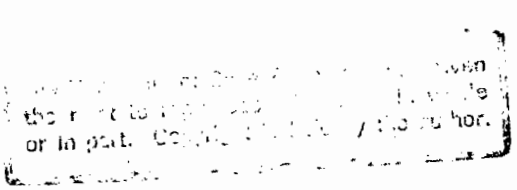
March, 1995



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Abstract

This thesis examines how poetic responses to the Holocaust in America, when they emerged, have differed from the novels addressing the same subject; how the Second World War has challenged, in a way the First World War did not, basic humanistic assumptions regarding the image of man, the role of God, the benefits of civilisation & culture, and the humanising power of art or reason; and how this impact has influenced modern trends in poetry.

After an extensive background section documenting the impact the Holocaust and Second World War have made upon the literary imagination, an extensive review is conducted of the varied critical positions and criteria, both aesthetic and ethical, from which American literary responses have been evaluated. Among the major critical positions is the belief that there should be no literary response to the Holocaust; that this literary response must primarily serve to document and testify; that the Holocaust should not be addressed imaginatively by non-victims; and that the Holocaust should not be used as a metaphor to convey some other subject or theme.

These and other critical standpoints are discussed in relation to works by ten American poets whose poetry is representative of the ways in which the Holocaust has impacted on the poetic imagination, the breadth of poetic responses to this atrocity, and the range of difficulties and corresponding criticisms which are associated with almost all attempts to respond creatively to the Holocaust. The poets examined are Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Maxine Kumin, Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, Stephen Berg, Van Brock, W.D. Snodgrass, William Heyen and Charles Reznikoff. Where illustrative, comparisons to relevant European poets have been made, including Nellie Sachs and Paul Celan. It was concluded that certain poets (Levertov, Rich, Heyen), as well as certain critical standpoints (Ezrahi, Langer, James Young) did more justice to the reality of the Holocaust and the challenges it poses to the literary and poetic imagination.

Author's Note

There are two minor points with regard to convention & form of which I'd like to alert the reader:

In order to avoid the constant use of cumbersome footnotes, I have opted to use internal referencing in this thesis. However, to reduce so much as possible the distraction imposed by such parenthetical insertions into the text of the thesis, I have departed from the Harvard Convention in one respect: the year of publication is included only where it is necessary to distinguish between several publications written by the same author.

Secondly, I firmly believe that such gender-specific terminology as "he," "his," "man" or "mankind" are no longer appropriate for generic application to both sexes, and I have sought in this thesis to remove such language so far as possible while avoiding a tiring repetition of wordy substitutions such as "he or she." However, one phrase, "the image of man," I found to carry too rich a history in its specific wording, and it was too often tied to citations from other authors to gracefully remove. Therefore, I have used this phase in my thesis, and of course mean "man" in the most generic sense to include both sexes.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank:

Stephen Watson & André Brink for their patience, understanding and indefatigable support;

John Felstiner for the inspiration; and

my parents for the 24 years of preparation.

Dedication

To my relations, and 6 million more.

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1. Introduction & Background

Historians, sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists have all addressed the Holocaust in hundreds of studies that are rational, well-intentioned responses to the inhumane and unreasonable. The literary response is perhaps more appropriate because it represents an emotional and spiritual reaction to the historical facts and is not restricted to a rational and logical ordering: such an approach, when facing a machinery which murdered 11,000,000 people and attempting to express the incomprehensible, is not solely appropriate. The poet's "uncensored" response may present a fuller, more revealing understanding of our current concept of humanity and the Holocaust's impact upon it.

However, early responses to the Holocaust have not generally been literary in nature. Because of the singular nature of the Holocaust in both scale and kind, it has presented to the author and critic unique problems, both ethical and aesthetic, in developing and evaluating an imaginative response. The American literary responses have been particularly overlooked by critics due to the emphasis placed on literature written by actual Holocaust survivors.

This thesis will examine how poetic responses to the Holocaust in America, when they emerged, have differed from the novels addressing the same subject; how the Second World War has challenged, in a way that the First World War did not, basic humanistic assumptions regarding the image of man, the role of God, the benefits of civilisation & culture, and the humanising power of art or reason; and how this impact of the Holocaust has influenced modern trends in poetry.

Dozens of popular novels or films by major American authors explore the inmates' capture and camp experience or the survivors' readjustment to everyday living. The recent Spielberg film *Schindler's List*, based on Thomas Keneally's novel, is a particularly well known example. These works have received considerable critical attention, whereas the responses to the Holocaust in poetry generally has not. Yet the poetic responses,

particularly those by nonvictims, have mostly been of a more creative and experimental nature; they have more daringly attempted to imaginatively convey a subject many critics argue cannot, or should not, enter the literary domain. In so doing, these poets have faced moral and aesthetic difficulties, challenged conventions of form and taste, and have often been sharply criticised on the basis of often contradictory standards which themselves have been hotly debated.

In recent years there has been published a considerable number of bibliographies, anthologies and critical discussions concerning poetry of the Holocaust published in America (cf Edehleit; Ezrahi; Forché; Friedman; Fishman; Florsheim; Greenberg; Kohn; Rosenfeld 1980; Schiff). Taken together, these sources can be considered a comprehensive survey of American Holocaust poetry. What quickly becomes apparent upon reviewing the anthologies and bibliographies, however, is that the majority of the poetry is written by relatively unknown Jewish immigrants or their children; often the poet only addresses the Holocaust in passing in a few poems before moving on to other themes, and the Holocaust poetry itself largely attempts little more than to document memories of the camps, sometimes ordinary domestic details (Florscheim, p16).

This use of poetry-as-documentation, as will be discussed, is a well-accepted use of Holocaust literature, but hardly makes for interesting or innovative poetry. What has guided the selection of poets for this study is not the poet's mention in bibliographies or anthologies, but in critical discussions of Holocaust poetry. Although this critical attention is largely lacking, three factors contribute to a poet's mention in reviews and inclusion in this study: how prominent the poet; how large a role the Holocaust plays in his or her poetry; and, most importantly, how the poet goes about using or misusing the Holocaust in his or her poetry. Most of the published criticism is focused on perceived misuses of the Holocaust, much of which is written by poets who had no direct contact with the Holocaust themselves. This poetry attracts critical attention if its treatment of the Holocaust "strikes some nerve" in the sensitivities of the (usually Jewish) critic. It is the goal of

this study to identify and classify what nerves are being struck: the moral and aesthetic difficulties endemic to creative transformation of the Holocaust.

Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Maxine Kumin, Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, Stephen Berg, Van Brock, W.D. Snodgrass, William Heyen and Charles Reznikoff are all American poets who have addressed the Holocaust in their poetry. As will be seen, these ten have been carefully selected because they are fully representative of the range of responses, and types of difficulties confronted by American poets responding creatively to the Holocaust.

In order to evaluate the difficulties associated with responding imaginatively to the Holocaust for a particular poet, it will often be necessary to extrapolate from arguments made by critics responding to similar approaches in prose or by survivors writing in other languages. This is particularly because critical attention to Holocaust responses by non-victims, especially poets, has been lacking. Such extrapolation will be assisted by additional comparison to prominent European poets and Holocaust survivors such as Nellie Sachs and Paul Celan. Furthermore, a sizeable body of criticism will first be addressed without in-depth reference to the specific poets considered in this study, who will thereafter be surveyed with respect to the difficulties and dilemmas they face, and the breadth and depth of the Holocaust's impact on the poetic mind. This approach, additionally, is in keeping with the majority of publications, mostly surveys or anthologies, which consider the literary responses made to the Holocaust by non-victims.

The Holocaust is of primary interest because of its singularity. As Kurt Goldstein of the International Auschwitz Committee argues, "persecutions are part of history, but the factory-like systematic extermination of entire peoples...is unique" (Time 6 Feb 1995, p21). It is hardly surprising that an event which captured the world's attention would be reflected in poetry, although the particular character of responses it provokes are worthy of study. However, because it is without any referent, to many critics the Holocaust sits uneasily within history and not at all within

art. Therefore, to fully appreciate the impact the Holocaust has made on the development of poetry, and the inordinate difficulties involved with incorporating it artistically, it is necessary to first consider the broader process of critical engagements with the Holocaust, and how its impact has qualitatively differed from that of previous instances of atrocity.

The literature of the Holocaust began to receive a considerable amount of critical attention in the middle 1970s. Most scholars consider this literature to be any non-scholarly personal response to the Holocaust by, for the most part, the survivors of the concentration camps or the targeted victims who managed to escape fascist Europe. Many literary responses of the survivors were not written by self-conscious writers in a particular tradition, but by individuals who felt the need to act as a witness or to document an experience that victimised them or their people physically and psychologically. The literature crosses national boundaries and is in numerous languages, including German, French, Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew, although often the authors write in a second language which has a potentially larger readership than their native one. With this early focus on the literature of survivors, the few American contributions to Holocaust literature were largely ignored. Lillian Kremer, in her 1989 survey Witness Through the Imagination: Jewish-American Holocaust Literature, laments that "American Holocaust literature had not received the critical explication and assessment it merits...examination of American works has been limited to occasional chapters in books emphasising European literature, short articles in scholarly journals, and brief reviews" (Kremer, p14).

Most critical studies of Holocaust literature focus primarily on the philosophical, psychological or religious perspective expressed in novels, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, plays and poems mainly by the survivors and secondarily on the characteristics of the representation of the Holocaust by major American and English writers. The scholarly and critical focus has not been, for the most part, strictly literary, but rather on the psychological or emotional motivation or purpose for which the work was written. As a further complication, in addressing an author's response to the Holocaust,

critics refer to a translation of the work; if the work has not been translated, critics loosely translate passages to illustrate a point. In addition, they rarely present a detailed discussion of a work's structure or the thematic idiosyncrasies of the genre in which it is expressed (Braham). Alvin Rosenfeld, in A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature has gone so far as to assert that this should be the case: "while no literature is beyond judgment, the particular body of writings under review here does not cry out in the first place, in my opinion, for aesthetic evaluation" (Rosenfeld 1980, p27).

The reasons many of the critics do not pay much attention to differences in genre is that their interest is extra-literary; one of the major writers they often discuss, Elie Wiesel, writes in a variety of genres which overlap so that even the boundaries between his fiction and non-fiction are unclear. For example, in his first book, Night, an autobiography, Wiesel employs many of the techniques of fiction. This work, which is almost always discussed by critics, partly accounts for the failure to focus on the distinctions between fiction and non-fiction in the prose which addresses the Holocaust. In addition, more recent historical novels and fiction-like treatment of real life by such writers as Norman Mailer and Truman Capote have helped to maintain this trend.

Wiesel probably has had more of an impact on what is now termed Holocaust studies than any other figure. Most critics and scholars of Holocaust literature not only discuss his novels and essays, but also have incorporated Wiesel's values into their own critical perspectives. Deported from his home in Hungary as a child, Wiesel was sent to Birkenau, Auschwitz, Buna and finally Buchenwald-- an ordeal that strengthens his commitment to see that the Holocaust horror is understood and never forgotten. Afterwards, in France, he became a journalist. However, it was not until the late 1950s that he began publishing his views on the events that dominated his early life. The publication of Night (an account of his hometown life in Hungary and later in the death camps) began his career as an essayist, novelist and spokesman on the Holocaust. In 1960 and 1962

he published two short novels treating his adjustment to life after the Holocaust.

After the Eichmann trial in 1961, Wiesel wrote a highly influential essay claiming that the trial did not do justice to the victims. From the mid-1960s through the early 1970s, he produced a series of essays on books by the survivors, on American Jewish writers, and on current attitudes toward the Holocaust. By 1973 he had written six novels. They include some of the themes found in the French Existentialists, such as the individual's responsibility to fight against his or her own and others' indifference. Of equal importance are the imagery and themes he has drawn from the lives and belief of Hasidic Jews, who are mystics. Wiesel's juxtaposition of the post-Holocaust world with a legend-shrouded Hasidic world view that developed through centuries of persecution is an interesting one. It is his use of Hasidic legend in the essays that make them read like fiction (Rittner, pp21-23).

Since the early 1970s, Wiesel has turned from fiction to primarily creating personal commentaries on Biblical and Hasidic legend, as well as essays and talks that deal directly with the Holocaust, the current plight of Soviet Jewry, and what he considers the apathy of American Jews concerning the survival of world Jewry. He also published in the late 1970s a play and a novel on Soviet anti-Semitism.

American Jewish authors have written increasingly on the theme of American anti-Semitism. This was the main subject of Arthur Miller's Focus, Laura Hobson's Gentlemen's Agreement and Saul Bellow's The Victim, and it has figured in various other novels. Another allied theme which emerged in the 1950s was the defeat of fascism by heroism: the American Jew saves the victimised European Jew. As more time passed, American Jewish writers wrote on Jewish themes. Without a doubt, the Holocaust contributed to the heightened awareness in American Jewish writers of their heritage (Stember).

Although information on the Nazi treatment of the Jews began to appear in newspapers in late 1942, Edward Alexander notes in his "Essays

on Holocaust Literature and the Jewish Fate" that it was not until the sixties that writers confronted the central issue of the Nazi atrocities. Since the sixties, however, there has been a complete reversal; and, as Alexander observes, "a number of American Jewish writers, including some of the most gifted, have sought to rediscover for us in the Holocaust our own buried life" (Alexander, p127).

A number of novels from the seventies display a commitment of American authors to confront the Holocaust. Susan Fromberg Shaeffer's Anya, the story of a survivor's death camp experiences and later life in America, was so well researched and consequently so convincing that she had to insist that the book was strictly fiction. In By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature, Sydra Ezrahi explains this growth in American Holocaust literature by maintaining that "the realistic fiction written by American-Jewish writers in the sixties and seventies tries to make up for the lack of empirical resources by a thoroughly researched representation of events which were still unknown and by literary models which had not yet been established in the 1940s" (Ezrahi, p180). Perhaps what is also operating is a subconscious feeling of guilt that the author was spared the Holocaust and did not go through this terrible rite of passage. Such guilt and possibly perverse feelings of envy are likely to lead to an effort to compensate by doing full justice to the subject through exhaustive research.

However, in a number of early novels on the Holocaust, the primary focus is on a character's effort to lead a normal life after a death camp experience. This is true of Edward Wallant's The Pawnbroker, and Saul Bellow's Mr. Sammler's Planet. These novels explore in varying degrees the meaning of everyday existence in the light of such evil. They might be called novels of adjustment (Friedman). It is also evident that each represents the author's own adjustment to this traumatic episode. Through fiction a writer explores his or her own orientation to the event.

Two later novels of the 1980s are extraordinary examples. The English poet and translator, D.M. Thomas in The White Hotel presents a series of dreamlike visions associated with a neurotic character. The setting

crosses over from the main character's interior visions to the ravine at Babi Yar. Through the presentation of the symbolically overlapping interior journey and encounters with the external, namely death at Babi Yar, Thomas psychoanalyses both a neurotic character's trauma & hysteria along with the traumatic event in recent human history, the Holocaust. George Steiner, in The Portage in San Cristobal of A.H., set in the jungles of South America, describes the capture of Hitler at ninety by several Jews and their ensuing conversation. It is a complex book which raises questions concerning Hitler's world image and serves to demythify and deglorify Hitler. Both of these books represent highly conscious considerations of the Holocaust in the light of dozens of literary treatments.

In the fall of 1980 in an article in the New York Times Book Review several major contemporary authors such as Joyce Carol Oates and John Barth noted that the novel of the seventies had shifted away from the so-called new novel, away from the innovations of, say, Thomas Pynchon and William Gass ("How is..."). With the exception of Thomas's and Steiner's books, which may be indicative of trends in future books, most of Holocaust novels by American writers are not innovative. Most do not experiment with time sequence or narrative point of view; the subject matter seems to inhibit experimentation. Although Bellow's Mr Sammler's Planet explores the consciousness of the main characters, the technique is not as interesting as that of his later novel, Humboldt's Gift; he does not pursue questions of humanity and evil (Goldman).

Responses to the Holocaust in poetry have been more varied than those in fiction. This probably results from the flexibility of the short poem, which can afford the poet tremendous freedom in theme and structure. Unlike the novelists, many poets' interest in the Holocaust parallels their breaks from convention and the traditional role of the poet. If the enormity of the Holocaust and its effect on our cultural consciousness can be conveyed at all, it might well be done through poetry. The genre of poetry does not, on the other hand, lend itself as well to a chronological portrayal of factual details, which characterises many of the prose responses to the Holocaust.

2. The World Wars

Although the trenches of World War I did spur the graphic poetry of Owen and others, the First World War never became so significant a vehicle for further developments in poetry as did the second. The poets of the First World War never felt confronted by the existential absurdity of the A-bomb and the death camps. The trench warfare made clear the horrors of war, but did not so strongly raise questions of humanity's fundamental nature as deeply as did the Holocaust. World War I did hasten the disillusionment with Edwardian complacency and optimism; the effect of brutality undercut naiveté and helped create a highly ironic war poetry, although some of the poems, especially those that struck an elegiac note for young men killed in battle, had an almost romantic appeal. However, as James Mersmann, author of Out of the Vietnam Vortex: A Study of Poets Against the War argues, "Whether or not the war was presented as heroic or terrible, the poetry of World War I commonly accepted war as unavoidable, or readily pointed the blame to specific persons or classes of persons" (Mersmann, pp2-4).

As a whole, poetry of World War I also did not undertake a radical departure from traditional verse. Mersmann points out that the poetry was either "naively heroic-romantic, starkly realistic, or radically socialistic" and all but the latter "for the most part adhered to rhymes and traditional meters" (Mersmann, pp4,12). Paul Fussell in The Great War and Modern Memory, an excellent book on the poetry of the war, is more specific and makes and interesting observation on the relationship between form and underlying theme. He claims that "high" diction dominated the poetry at the beginning of the war, revealing "an attempt to make sense of the war in relation to inherited tradition" (Fussell, p57).

The implications of the First World War were limited by peculiar ironies. As Fussell notes, "Eight million people were destroyed because two persons, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his Consort had been shot." The immediate cause of the war was insignificant, and the nature of battle

for the British was riddled with contradictions. As Fussell also points out, "what makes experience in the Great War unique and gives it a special freight of irony is the ridiculous proximity of the trenches to home" (Fussell, pp7,64). As a result, it called into question the meaning of life as it went on at home. In a number of novels the dissolution of the older British culture begins with the War or is hastened by it. Afterwards, while a few poets alluded to the Great War, its impact on poetry was limited. The cultural changes, however, did have an effect on the development of twentieth-century poetry. Such poets as Auden, Spender and MacNeice embraced socialist causes partly as a result of a general disillusion with Edwardian England and England's posture in the First World War. In addition, the promotion of humanist ideals by Auden and his circle was spurred by the senseless destruction of a generation that was subject to an antiquated code of honour.

The poets of the 1930s shifted radically from the conception of poetry held by Georgians and by the nineteenth-century romantics. They rejected the notion that art could be its own justification. Auden, MacNeice and Spender sought solutions for special social problems and advocated them in their poetry. Auden went as far as to psychologise on the cause of the problems in society.

Auden in particular rejected the view of poetry as revelation and was highly critical of what he considered the romantic poet's egoism. He was also constantly taking the older poetic forms and placing them in modern contexts. He viewed the role of the poet as that of a craftsman whose purpose is to teach and entertain. Daniel Hoffman, in his essay "Poetry: Dissidents from Schools," notes that "there is hardly a form of English verse that Auden did not rekindle with new life for modern occasions: ballads, sonnets, sonnet sequences, odes, sestinas, elegies, verse plays, opera libretti, [and] lyrics to be set to music..." (Hoffman, p458).

Through the use of these forms Auden made his protest against the rise of fascism in Europe and its victory in Spain in the Spanish Civil War. Rather than merely implore or challenge the reader, Auden set to lead

people into drawing their own moral conclusions. By employing traditional forms, Auden distances his readers from the poem and hopes that this will lead the readers to focus upon themselves and reconsider their attitudes. The poem, not the voice of the poet, is meant to elicit a response. With all of this, Auden felt that art cannot make things happen, but can persuade and teach. He addresses the poetry of Yeats on this point in the poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," saying "for poetry makes nothing happen..." (Auden, p197). Nevertheless, he wrote as though it could make things happen for many years.

Although the Oxford poets of the 1930s proclaimed what poetry should "be" and "do," an underlying moderation is discernible when their work is carefully scrutinised. MacNeice's long essay, Modern Poetry, for example, appears to be a manifesto making a case for Auden's and Spender's kind of poetry. Even there, however, he points out that poetry should not be degraded into merely serving a cause no matter how good the cause might be. The Autumn Journal, a personal poetic record of the Spanish Civil War from August to December 1938 ends not with a call to arms but with a prayer-like invocation for love (MacNeice). The poets of the thirties broke away from the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century view of the role of the poet and what function structure should have. At the same time they had a persistent belief that love and its expression in art could save the world.

Fascist victories along with other factors brought a disillusionment to which each poet reacted in a different way. Auden moved to America and, like T.S. Eliot, turned to the church, a change which was reflected in his poetry. Spender is one of the few members of the Oxford group who over the last thirty years or so has remained an outspoken humanist. He was always much more lyrical than Auden and MacNeice and resembles Owen in his vivid descriptions of suffering. In the poems he wrote about the Spanish Civil War he depicts the experiences of men on both sides: for Spender the bloodshed transcended political orientation. For this reason he became disillusioned with Communism early on and with the

pretentiousness of fellow intellectuals at the Writer's Congress in Paris during the Spanish Civil War (O'Neill, p228).

On the other hand, the poets who came in to their own after the Second World War did not generally undergo the same disillusionment experienced by the Auden circle: they had less faith in any particular philosophy or the power of art. They faced a world in ruins: in such a world humanism was rendered obsolete (Malkoff).

Many poems written since the early 1960s by American poets additionally suggest that Auschwitz, the Bomb and other recent atrocities have eroded the poet's self-concept as a proud spokesman for society. The poet's superego, so to speak, has been undermined, and is presented as an imperfect being making a particular utterance. This concept of the poet's limitations is similar to the later Romantic poet's disillusionment expressed in the Byronic hero where the poet undercuts the speaker, the voice of the poem.

A number of critics agree that poetry in the second half of this century is markedly different from earlier poetry. Daniel Hoffman claims that although modern and post-modern poetry are part of the "great groundswell of the Romantic movement...the chief difference between the contemporary and the Romantic and modernist generation is, we recognise the past is lost" (Hoffman, p604). Indeed, as a result of the Second World War and its destruction of European cities, part of the past was lost in a very real physical sense. But more important than that, as a result of Nazi brutality and planned genocide, all innocence regarding humanity's goodness or the power of reason was lost: terrible violence had sprung up in the heart of civilisation. The security of the individual was also undercut, left at the mercy of governments that demanded mindless obedience and created a method of destroying masses anonymously so that all signs of individuals were totally lost.

Under such circumstances humanistic concepts of order and reason are also threatened. In a handbook on contemporary American poetry, Karl Malkoff argues that because of the sense of "order lost, the need to discover

order that might not be apparent, but that existed nevertheless, became the dominant literary concern" of American poets following the First World War. But he goes on to point out that "By the end of the Second World War, the quest for order was no longer dominant," and then adds, "perhaps it is a matter of exhaustion" (Malkoff 1973, p2).

Malkoff's observation seems valid, but his identification of the First World War as the chief cause is questionable: the abandonment of order was characteristic of poems written during the 1960s, after the Eichmann trial and the beginning of the American consciousness of the Holocaust. Poetry following the Wars differs in the quest for order, not because of exhaustion but because World War I threatened order in society; the Holocaust threatened order in civilisation.

Steiner acutely observes in the preface to his essays, Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhumane, that "Ideas of cultural development, of inherent rationality held since ancient Greece...still intensely valid in the utopian historicism of Marx and stoic authoritarianism of Freud (both of them late outriders of Greco-Roman civilisations) can no longer be asserted with such confidence" (Steiner 1967, pix).

This threat to an earlier order appears to have had an effect on some poets' concept of history, the story of the rise and fall of civilisations. While Eliot, who was well established before the Second World War, looked at history and tradition for a model for contemporary values in art, post-Holocaust poet Anthony Hecht, who was clearly influenced by Eliot, in "Rites and Ceremonies," one of his major poems, focuses on a terrible event in recent history, the Holocaust, and recites past atrocities. Whereas Eliot in The Waste Land presents the current spiritual sterility of modern man in contrast to its status in previous ages, Hecht presents a landscape in which humanity is alienated from God in his evil acts from the Crusades through the Holocaust.

Although Rosenthal, in The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II, does not claim that contemporary poetry makes as great a break with tradition and older orientation as do Ries, Malkoff or

Steiner, he also perceives that many poets are grappling with a world changed by the Holocaust. The works of many poets suggest that their view of history and civilisation, diametrically opposed to Eliot's, contributed to their embracing a new poetry (Rosenthal).

Death and violence are of course the subjects of many contemporary poems. In Wolf Masks: Violence in Contemporary Poetry, Lawrence R. Ries notes two types of violence-- that of the forces of nature and that inflicted by men upon one another. Almost all the poetry after the Second World War that addresses violence, he asserts, received its "impetus from the perception of human violence, those immediate historical conditions that weighed as heavily upon the artist's sensitivity" (Ries, p7). He implies that violence is part of the collective consciousness so that even when a reader does not completely understand a poem, he accepts it because he has sensed its source. An awareness of terrible violence in the world is now all-encompassing, and the Holocaust lends itself well as a symbol to express it.

The Second World War and the Holocaust have brought about another change. Certain subjects and images had never appeared in poetry; now all the remnants of decorum have been swept away. Some critics consider what seem to be the pornographic and violent elements in poetry as indicative of a poet's failing imagination or even of neurosis. Ries argues against this notion, declaring that such imagery is not a failing of one poet but an appropriate response to what humans have done to his world. He argues that after the Second World War man was "left with a feeling of impotency and anonymity with which he was unable to cope. To compensate for this feeling of loss, he must assert himself in whatever way possible, the more violent and extreme the better" (Ries, p12).

Poems written in the sixties rather than those written during the Second World War reflect such a view. Ries believes that poems of engagement or poems which directly express a hatred of violence are outdated and futile. He argues further that the Auden group were the last poets to embrace this humanistic approach and that this approach has

"worn thin after the poetry of World War I, the Spanish Civil War, and World War II" (Ries, p13). The experience of the Second World War, with the atrocities of the Holocaust, contributed to the dissolution of the remnants of 19th-century optimism, and presented to novelists, poets and playwrights a set of tragic and bleak images of a scope and intensity never before encountered in history or art. While it might be naive to declare a clear-cut causality, Ries' argument regarding the impact of the Second World War upon poetry is convincing.

3. Civilisation & Progress

The Nazi extermination of six million Jews and five million non-Jewish civilians and military personnel almost defies the imagination. It involved a government's systematic destruction of a peaceful segment of its population and posed a devastating threat to the very foundation of civilisation, in a land of Beethoven, Schiller and Goethe. Lillian Kremer considers this event "a turning point in world history, a catastrophe that altered fundamental assumptions about the human condition" (p13), through which a variety of prevalent humanist ideas concerning government, culture and society were undermined: namely, the belief that reason conquers intolerance, science is beneficial for humanity, mankind is basically good, and through reason is improving.

Beginning in the 1930s, the anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria, countries historically tolerant of the Jews, was as common in the universities as it was in the villages (Hilberg). Later, science was a tool for destruction both in the war effort and in the concentration camps. Many of the educated and intelligensia used their skills for destroying as many people as quickly as possible with the least effort.

Most people take pride in society's progress and consider present societies far removed from the barbarous reign of such historic despots as Genghis Khan and Ivan the Terrible. Although instances of brutality have often occurred in the modern "civilised" era, they are often excused because they occur in war, when soldiers attack enemy populations or when soldiers

fight enemy soldiers. However, Germany, a prize example of western culture, a centre of the arts, literature, music and philosophy since the beginning of the nineteenth century, became guilty of a savagery greater than that of most "primitive" people. The combination of the military battle in the Second World War and the Holocaust resulted in a world trauma, and writers have sensed this. Responding to this, George Steiner writes:

> We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning...Moreover, it is not only the case that the established media of civilisation-- the universities, the arts, the book world-- failed to offer adequate resistance to political bestiality; they often rose to welcome it and to give it ceremony and apologia (Steiner 1967, p138).

As Steiner suggests, what was unusual in the Nazi destruction of the Jews was not only the 'breadth' of civilian life exterminated, but also the complete societal involvement in the Final Solution, the plan for the destruction of every Jew in Europe. This "solution" went far beyond any previous pogrom in Russia, Spain or elsewhere. The destruction process, according to theologian and historian Richard Rubenstein,

> required the cooperation of every sector of the German society. The bureaucrats drew up the definitions and decrees; the churches gave the evidence of Aryan descent; the postal authorities carried the messages of definition, expropriation, denaturalisation, and deportation; business corporations dismissed their Jewish employees and took over 'Aryanised' properties; the railroads carried the victims to their place of executions, a place made available to the Gestapo and SS by the *Wehrmacht* [traditional soldiers] (Rubenstein, p4).

Another basic difference from previous examples of barbarism was that many Nazis and their victims were generally well educated. Goering and Bormann, for example, put an end to thuggish street violence against the Jews and instead masterminded the methods for imprisoning millions with little public resistance. "It was only possible," argues Rubenstein, "to overcome the moral barrier that had in the past prevented the systematic riddance of surplus populations when the project was taking out of the hands of bullies and hoodlums and delegated to bureaucrats" (Rubenstein, p4). It was the determined and practised involvement of the backbone of

civilisation-- government-- that made the almost endless slaughter possible.

Many of the victims were educated and useful in society, but this, for the most part, made little difference to their fate. A consequence of some of the survivors' education is their varied responses to their experience. They have published documentary historical studies, philosophical or theological reflections, models of psychiatry or creativity, and personal reflections expressed in diaries, memoirs, novels, poems and plays.

4. Human Nature

The image of man as conceived by the thinkers of the Enlightenment was seriously eroded initially by the First World War and afterwards by Freud; the Holocaust completed this dissolution. Some of Freud's observations were tragically borne out by the Nazi debacle. Freud had attacked the notion that humanity is governed by reason alone and insisted that people are complex creatures driven by the desires for love, sexual fulfilment, and death; their thoughts, emotions and actions are unconsciously motivated by these drives. The image of man as a Noble Savage was therefore changed to Savage alone. Man is, as Jerome Bruner summaries Freud's view, "the unfinished product of nature: struggling against unreason, impelled by driving vicissitudes and urges that had to be contained if man were to live in society, host alike to seeds of madness and majesty, never fully free from an infancy, anything but innocent" (in Nelson, p279). Only through civilisation, argued Freud, can people live peacefully and productively. It is especially disconcerting, therefore, that he also argues that repression, the greatest threat to mental and often physical health, is a consequence of, or even a necessary prerequisite for, establishing civilisation.

One of the major conflicts humanity faces is the battle against its inclination toward aggression. Freud looked toward civilisation to "set limits to man's aggressive instincts and to hold the manifestations of them in check..." Unfortunately, he reports, "in spite of every effort, these endeavours of civilisation have not so far achieved very much" (Freud, p59).

Civilisation and its Discontents was published in Vienna in 1930. Eight years after receiving the Goethe Prize for the book, Freud fled from Vienna when the Gestapo invaded his home. Freud's theory of aggression was borne out by what subsequently took place for the next seven years, but the institutionalisation of aggression and legalisation of violence in the Nazi regime suggest that even Freud was overly optimistic.

Alvin Rosenfeld seeks to catalogue some of the ways the Holocaust has impacted upon our psyche, literature and world-view, by explicating just some of the ideas implied by the word Holocaust alone:

> "Holocaust" implies not just death but total destruction; not murder, which carries with it some still lingering if dreaded sense of personal violation, but annihilation on so massive and indiscriminate a scale as to render death void of all personal characteristics, and hence virtually anonymous or absurd. Moreover, "Holocaust" suggests not only a brutally imposed death but an even more brutally imposed life of humiliation, deprivation and degradation before the time of dying. The earlier Greek and Biblical connotations of sacrificial offering, while not altogether absent from the contemporary usage of the term, are submerged by the dominant political, racial, ideological and ethnological strains of Nazism, which not only accompanied but seem to have dictated the systematically planned elimination of the Jewish people. The resistance to that genocide, both physical and spiritual, also looks to find expression in "Holocaust," as do the elegiac and commemorative strains of remembrance itself. Finally, the incalculable damage done to our traditional concepts of God and man, of what it is that constitutes the norms and aspirations of social and cultural existence, begins to register in "Holocaust," even if all too weakly and imprecisely (Rosenfeld, 1980 pp3-4).

Norman Mailer has also written at length on the Holocaust's impact on the modern mind, and in so doing raises many of the questions which later literature on the Holocaust attempts to answer:

> Probably, we shall never be able to determine the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years. For the first time in civilised history, perhaps for the first time in all of history, we have been forced to live with the suppressed knowledge that the smallest facets of our personality or the most minor projection of our ideas, or indeed the absence of ideas and the absence of personality could mean equally well that we might still be doomed to die as a cipher in some vast statistical operation in which our teeth would be counted, and our hair would be saved, but our death itself would be unknown,

> unhonoured, and unremarked, a death which could not follow with dignity as a possible consequence of serious actions we had chosen, but rather a death by *deus ex machina* in a gas chamber or a radioactive city....The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it. For if tens of millions were killed in concentration camps out of the inexorable agonies and contractions of super-states founded upon the always insoluble contradictions of injustice, one was then obliged also to see that no matter how crippled and perverted an image of man was or the society he had created, it was nonetheless his creation, his collective creation...and if society was so murderous, then who could ignore the more hideous questions about his own nature? (Mailer, p9-11).

Indeed, as will be shown, American Holocaust poetry responds to these questions, and is haunted by investigations into the image of man, the role of God and religion, the psychology of fascism, the distinction between good and evil and the role of reason, order, culture and civilisation in a world shattered by the atrocity of Auschwitz. This poetry is permeated by a unified landscape of images and music, and at its core seeks to find some meaning in the Holocaust, and some role for art and language after atrocities of the Holocaust with which it was too closely involved. However, until this new and innovative poetry began to imaginatively raise such issues in the 1960s, it was questioned by many critics whether there should be literature arising from the Holocaust at all.

5. Monuments of Silence

Given that the Holocaust defies description by its sheer scale alone, and that any attempt to portray it in words can never do justice to the monstrosity of Auschwitz, many early critics argued the most appropriate response to the Holocaust is silence. Steiner argued first in "The Hollow Miracle" that the German language was ruined by its use in the Nazi death world, and second, in "K", that Auschwitz is unspeakable, beyond literature, so that poetry is inadequate to do justice to it (Steiner 1967). In Language and Silence, Steiner states again that "the reality of the Holocaust addresses the contemporary mind most effectively with the authority of silence....The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside

reason" (Steiner 1967, p108). This was in agreement with T.W. Adorno's famous edict that "After Auschwitz, writing poetry is an abomination" (Adorno p125).

Elie Wiesel states this same view perhaps more emphatically:

> One generation later, it can still be said and must now be affirmed: there is no such thing as a literature of the Holocaust, nor can there be. The very expression is a contradiction in terms. Auschwitz negates any form of literature, as it defies all systems, all doctrines....A novel about Auschwitz is not a novel, or else it is not about Auschwitz. The very attempt to write such a novel is blasphemy (Wiesel 1978, p1978).

German critic Reinhard Baumgart objects to Holocaust literature for a slightly different reason, namely that such literature imposes artificial meaning on mass suffering, and, "by removing some of the horror, commits a grave injustice against the victims" (cited in Rosenfeld 1980, p14). Michael Wyschogrod has more recently echoed this point of view: "I firmly believe that art is not appropriate to the Holocaust. Art takes the sting out of suffering...it is therefore forbidden to make fiction of the Holocaust....Any attempt to transform the Holocaust into art demeans the Holocaust and must result in poor art" (Wyschogrod p68). As increasingly imaginative uses of the Holocaust begin to appear in response to events of the 1960s, these objections resurface with renewed vigour, and will be discussed in reference to works by Plath, Snodgrass, Celan and others.

Steiner and the other critics formulated their opinions in the later 1950s through the middle 1960s before much of the later fiction and non-fiction on the Holocaust had appeared. At this time, the idea that the Holocaust is beyond the capacities of imaginative literature had been accepted by many critics. However, this opinion was not universal, and during the 1970s has been called into question by later critics, and even some of the original critics have reformulated their position. In appraising some of the newer poetry by Charles Reznikoff in 1976, Milton Hindus wonders "Was it possible, then, that the central event of Jewish history in almost 2,000 years defied the imagination and had best be surrounded by silence?" (Hindus, p27).

Two other more recent critics directly refute Adorno and Steiner. Langer & Alexander do not consider it impossible for literature to make a valid response to the Holocaust. Langer has published three books on what he has termed the literature of atrocity: The Holocaust and the Literature Imagination, The Age of Atrocity: Death in Modern Literature, and Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit. In the first, he distinguishes himself from Steiner and Adorno by claiming that "the fundamental task of the critic is not to ask whether it [the artist's presentation of atrocity] should or can be done, since it already has been, but to evaluate how it has been done, judge its effectiveness, and analyse its implication for literature and society" (Langer 1975, p22). Although there continues heated debate as to what constitutes an effective or even admissible presentation of the Holocaust, to this day the approach suggested by Langer is rarely taken by critics addressing American Holocaust literature.

Alvin Rosenfeld warns of the dangerous consequences of abandoning art in the face of atrocity: "As we distance ourselves in time from the event, and try to absorb it into consciousness, the silence, avoidance or even outright denial will be greater, and the incredibility of the Holocaust will consequently grow to dangerous proportions" (Rosenfeld 1980, p7). This presents a difficult contradiction for the author, where to Wiesel it is blasphemy to write a Holocaust novel, but to Rosenfeld it is an even greater blasphemy to remain silent. Rosenfeld notes, echoing Samuel Beckett from another context, "there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express...together with the obligation to express," and wonders, "Given the silencing power of the Holocaust, how can language faithfully record history?" (Rosenfeld 1980, p8).

In my opinion, while respectfully acknowledging the enormity, singularity and incomprehensibility of the Holocaust, one can hardly feel satisfied with an injunction against all forms of expressing it, nor can one expect such a pivotal moment in modern history to so affect the literature, of

both Jews and non-Jews alike, without entering it. Indeed, one of the ironies inherent in the Final Solution is that it led to countless descriptions of pre-war Jewish life in Europe as well as the accounts of the life and death of the Jews in the camps-- a literature which has carried on forty years after Hitler's death. Perhaps the rather extreme views presented by Wiesel, Steiner, Adorno, Baumgart, Wyschogrod and others is the literary equivalent of a moment of silence during the years immediately following the event; an extreme response to an extreme event. This would be consistent with the delayed appearance of imaginative literature, particularly poetry on the Holocaust until the late 1960s, as well as the later adjustment of opinion by many of the critics cited above. As Langer has argued, what is clearly more interesting to the student of American poetry on the Holocaust is not whether such poetry should exist, but how the Holocaust has been portrayed and incorporated into the poetry, what function it serves, what unique difficulties the poet faces when making use of the Holocaust and what critical reception this poetry has received. As Kremer concludes in her 1989 survey of American poets who have addressed the Holocaust:

> Wiesel in The Oath examined the possibility that it might have been better to have remained silent in the face of such evil. Steiner, Adorno have also....The poets presented in this study did not grapple with the dilemma of speech or silence; if there is any dissent, it is in the manner of articulation (Kremer, p2).

6. Tests of Truth

The manner of articulation which first appeared, particularly in prose, was testimony, by far the most prevalent form of Holocaust literature through 1970. No longer endorsing silence, in a collection of essays, A Jew Today, Wiesel addresses the question of why he writes on such subjects as the Holocaust. His answer is simple: "I know that the role of the survivor was to testify" (p115). Indeed, he argues, every survivor has "the duty to testify." Because part of the Nazi plan was both to destroy every Jew and to conceal the facts, Wiesel believes that "not to remember was equivalent to becoming the enemy's accomplice" (Wiesel 1978, p198). This assumption concerning

the primary purpose of the literature of the Holocaust has been widely accepted by scholars and critics and is often the basis for their discussions.

Hence, a group of writers and critics, such as George Steiner, T.W. Adorno, A.L. Alvarez, Alvin Rosenfeld, Edward Alexander and Sydra Ezrahi, beginning in 1963 through 1985 and beyond, describe the literature of the survivors and evaluate the non-autobiographical and non-documentary materials by American and English writers on the basis of the historical validity of their statements on the Holocaust. These critics claim that the Holocaust was a unique event in human history, and therefore argue that writers have an especially difficult and perhaps impossible task in dealing with it. Consequently, they judge literary efforts by how much historical accuracy they convey and the validity of the author's concept of the Holocaust. Little space is devoted to form or language.

This approach, which evaluates a literary work's approximation of historical reality, represents a sharp departure from the New Critical approach to literature, taken in the 1950s which focuses on the text alone. Steiner, Adorno, and the others assume literature may be dwarfed by the enormity of its source. Although acknowledging the differences among fiction, non-fiction, poetry and drama, they make the same demands on the four genres. All forms of literature should make the reader understand the "true" nature of an event that is beyond the power of unaided imagination.

Rosenfeld suggests that the fiction on the Holocaust is weaker than the non-fiction. After surveying various novels and plays, he claims that "imaginative literature on this subject does not carry a sufficient authority in its own right and needs support from without" (Rosenfeld 1980, p79), such as a reliance upon historical fact. Because fiction is more effective than non-fiction, he argues, such genres do have a place, although novelists especially should represent the Holocaust accurately; this creates a heavy reliance on the facts which may limit a novel's possibilities. Rosenfeld applies the same standards to all genres, and evaluates the clarity and impact of the individual work. He prefers Wiesel's essays over his novels because they are clearer and less shrouded in ambiguity. Finally, Rosenfeld

writes that "to register and record the enormity of human loss" is "one of the major functions of Holocaust literature," and the function of poetry is "articulating powerful truths" (p27). Ezrahi, even in the late 1970s, also evaluates literary presentations of the Holocaust on the basis of their truth and accuracy. This perspective represents a return almost to the early view of Adorno and Steiner, who did most of their studies when less had been written on this subject.

Echoing Wyschogrod, Kremer, too, argues that "To structure a creative response to a destructive force is an anomaly. Nothing about the Holocaust is aesthetic. It is a denial of the creative instinct" (p28). James Young, in his book Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust, believes that "the role of the critic here is not to sort "fact" from fiction...but to sustain an awareness of both the need for unmediated facts in this literature and the simultaneous incapacity if narrative is to document these facts" (p11). In explaining this strong trend in the literature and criticism, James Young notes that in both the Torah & Talmud the injunction to relate one's witness of an iniquity is taken by the rabbis as explicitly commanded: "And he is a witness whether he has seen or known of it; if he does not utter it, then he shall bear his iniquity" (Lev 5.1; Young 1988). Young observes that "Bearing witness is less a literary act and more a national obligation. Holocaust writers have assumed that the more realistic a representation, the more adequate it becomes as testimonial evidence" (Young 1988, p17).

This approach to Holocaust literature, which closely parallels the call for silence, is also hardly a satisfactory or reasonable expectation. It is certainly true that most of the early literature on the Holocaust was written by survivors with the expressed intention of documenting as factually as possible their concentration camp experience; even the later literature by what has been termed the "second generation," or the Jewish children of Holocaust survivors, has adhered to similar ideals and hence avoided many of the difficulties inherent in the imaginative representation of the Holocaust in art. However, precisely because of this reliance upon fact and testimony, these novels can hardly be called literature, and nor have they been

appraised as such by critics. Indeed, this pervasive critical focus on realism explains the dearth of critical attention given to the Holocaust Literature by American non-victims, often overlooked in favour of the literature of the mostly European and Israeli survivors.

Lawrence Langer, in his essay "Fictional facts and Factual Fictions: History in Holocaust Literature," acknowledges the difficulty of maintaining "a symbiotic kinship between actual and imaginative truth in the literature of the Holocaust." For Langer, a major task of Holocaust criticism is "to clarify the complex bond, in the minds of both author and audience, linking the oppressions of history to the impressions of art" (in Braham, p127). Certainly, considerations of taste and ethics must balance the "artistic licence" an author brings to bear when portraying historical matters. However, as Langer quite astutely argues, where the Holocaust is involved, there is little room for balance at all:

> When the Holocaust is the theme, history imposes limitations on the supposed flexibility of artistic licence. We are confronted by the perplexing challenge of the reversal of normal creative procedure: instead of Holocaust fictions liberating the facts and expanding the range of their implications, Holocaust facts enclose the fictions...history and art stand guard over their respective territories, wary of abuses that either may commit upon the other (Langer 1990, p129).

Elie Wiesel proclaims that "If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony" (in Rosenfeld, p27). However, if a "literature of testimony" was confined to a recitation of historical facts, it would hardly be a new or interesting literature. Wiesel advocates a realist approach at a time when realism had long been displaced by modernism. Ultimately, with the flowering of imaginative, innovative and often problematic American Holocaust poetry during the 1960s, often by non-victims without any personal connections with the events of the World War II, the critical narrow-mindedness advocated by Wiesel and Rosenfeld was repeatedly challenged until, though often vehemently denounced, the new imaginative literature could no longer be ignored.

7. The 1960s & Holocaust Awareness in America

The Holocaust, as something distinct from World War II, was not fully recognised by the rest of the world until after the war and did not penetrate the artistic imagination of most American writers until after the trial of Adolf Eichmann which took place in Jerusalem in 1961. The terrible account of Auschwitz was also grimly detailed by the key figures who ran the camp in their Frankfurt trial which began in 1963 and lasted two years.

Historians, however, agree that it was chiefly the Eichmann trial of 1961 which made many Americans aware of the Holocaust. Ezrahi, for example, claims that the trial was "a watershed in the American perception of the Holocaust, as it provided near-personal contact with survivors and an unprecedented immersion into the facts for those who followed it though the public media" (Ezrahi, p180). The Eichmann trial, moreover, brought world-wide attention to the Nazi war crimes and incredible details of the Nazi enactment of the Final Solution, the annihilation of the Jews and anyone of Jewish extraction. Eichmann personally had masterminded the slave and death camps. He described Auschwitz, for example, as a camp in which up to 10,000 people were exterminated daily. It was strictly a death camp where men, women and children were brought after working in other camps or directly from the ghettos. (Not surprisingly, given the camp's scale, scope and notoriety, "Auschwitz" has come to be synonymous with concentration camps and the Holocaust.) The contents of Eichmann's testimony, and the presence of this man whose evil seemed limitless, resulted in a new attention to the Holocaust by the world at large, and discussions by theologians, psychologists, historians and sociologists. James Young has written that:

> The Eichmann trial in Jerusalem riveted public and media attention on the heretofore neglected details of the Holocaust....at a time when images of the Holocaust flooded the media and commanded world attention as they had not since the war (Young 1988, pp129 & 145).

The trial precipitated the publication of dozens of non-fiction and fictionalised accounts by the survivors.

One of the first discussions of the trial, Hannah Arendt's book Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, which appeared, in part, in February and March of 1963 in The New Yorker, was published later that year and brought additional attention to the trial. First, Arendt's presentation of the governmental machinations of the Nazi enactment of the Final Solutions was widely disseminated. Second, in her report on Eichmann's testimony, she noted carefully what he said. For example, he considered himself dutiful, and referred to the destruction of the Jews as their "evacuation." Such details were highly thought-provoking concerning humanity's capacity for evil. Finally, Arendt addressed the nature of Eichmann's evil and moral issues surrounding the trial itself. This led to a heated debate among American intellectuals which to this day has not been completely resolved.

In Arendt's 1971 Lecture "Thinking and Moral Considerations" she summaries her concept of "the banality of evil." She defined this as follows:

> no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness. However monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect in his past as well as in his behaviour during the trial and the preceding police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think (Arendt, 1978 p14).

This thesis has been heavily contested, as many critics are vehemently against generalising the central incident in modern Jewish history as an event which could have happened to anybody, inflicted by anyone. The ensuing critical debate concerning the extent to which the Holocaust can be generalised marks one of the central difficulties in American poetry of the Holocaust, but this will be discussed later. At the moment it is sufficient to say that Arendt's portrayal of Eichmann, along with her discussion of humanity's capacity for evil, has also provided material for some poets, and references to Eichmann as the embodiment of evil, or to Arendt's ideas on man's capacity for evil, occur frequently, particularly in the

poetry of Anne Sexton and Denise Levertov. Arendt's thesis was one of the first and is still among the most influential studies to address the Holocaust.

Although several other important studies that treat the Holocaust did appear before Arendt's book, for instance, Raul Hildberg's The Destruction of the European Jews, it was the middle sixties that signalled the appearance of a further series of books treating the bleak history of the Nazi destruction of the Jews, the Jewish resistance, the theological ramifications of the Holocaust and finally the political significance of it. This trend, gaining in force and volume, has continued into the 1990s. In 1991 and 1992, over a dozen books were published on the Holocaust (Friedman).

The term *Holocaust*, from the Hebrew for "'burnt offering" and the Greek for "whole burnt," was not even used until 1965. It was only then that Alexander Donat in his The Holocaust Kingdom, and other writers in the mid-sixties started using the term to refer to the Jewish fate in the Second World War (Friedman). Prior to this time, not only was the term not used, but little attention had been given to the rounding up and annihilation of the six million Jews even though many people were aware of Auschwitz from the documentary material released after the camps were liberated and the subsequent trial of the Nazi war criminals in Nuremberg in 1946. Apparently, many commentators, among others, were psychically numbed by the sheer extent of the terror and tragedy of the war itself; for example, Telfor Taylor, a historian, in a review article on Walter Laquer's The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth About Hitler's "Final Solution", admits that although he read news accounts of the Final Solution, for some reason they did not register (Taylor pp1,18). Clearly, some kind of psychological disassociation had set in.

It was more consequential, however, that the commander of the Allied armies knew of the death camps and could have destroyed them. This failure, Taylor concludes from Laqueur's study, was a result of the preoccupation with the war effort; a wariness of what some suspected to be false propaganda and the fact that the information on the camps was so shocking, it was not only implausible but incomprehensible. Immediately

following the war, the press was deluged with the details of Auschwitz; it took much longer for the news to registered and be absorbed. Fifteen years later the Eichmann trial reopened the wound, and Americans were more ready to accept the reality of Auschwitz.

In may well be asked at this point why it was not until twenty-five years after the Nazi regime had been overthrown that Jewish American writers began to treat the themes of the Holocaust. Ezrahi offers two reasons. First, many of the later writers were assimilated or acculturated and felt no special ties to European Jews. Second, the enormity of the events had an immobilising effect like that already described (Ezrahi, pp176-216).

In the view of the English critic, Alvarez, neither time nor distance makes it easier to write fiction about Auschwitz. In his essays on the Holocaust's impact upon literature, he argues that because of ominous political developments and a nuclear military build-up since the Second World War, the camps have gained in meaning; they are now the symbol of a world where everyone, being a mere bomb's distance from destruction, is on death's borderline, as were the camp inmates. The Holocaust thereby not only altered man's image but has become symbolic of our contemporary situation.

However, it would be simplistic to explain the appearance of Holocaust literature in America purely through the influence of the Eichmann trial and a nuclear build-up with the constant threat of world destruction and nuclear holocaust it carried with it. The 1960s in America numbed by countless upheavals and instances of social turmoil, including race riots, the new left, the disruptions on college campuses, Hiroshima, Vietnam, feminism and the civil rights movement. No doubt these upheavals had an impact, and it can be seen in some poetry that the awakening of Holocaust imagery becomes intermingled with or usurped by a need to address more recent political turmoils.

Even so, it is clear that, since the 1960s, the terms and images of the Holocaust have become part of the permanent vocabulary of historians,

theologians and politicians. Subsequent wars in Vietnam, Cambodia and elsewhere are thus often described in terms of Nazi barbarism and bureaucracy. The vocabulary and images of the Holocaust have also made an unmistakable appearance in American literature. Although the uses and aesthetics of recent Holocaust poetry vary widely, the underlying images are remarkably similar, suggesting a common consciousness of the Holocaust and all its emblems. Additionally, many of these poems are particularly innovative in their aesthetic means.

8. A Question of Authority

With the emergence of new literature written by American non-victims, both addressing the Holocaust and using the Holocaust as a metaphor for other concerns, many critics have had to seriously reconsider their appraisal of Holocaust literature as testimony written by survivors. Ignoring, for the moment, how the Holocaust may be used, one must first consider who is justified in using it. The Holocaust raises at the outset questions of narrative authority which few other historical occasions can be said to equal (Langer 1990). Wiesel, not surprisingly, expresses the opinion which was at first common to many critics: "Whoever has not lived through the event can never know it. And whoever has lived through it can never fully reveal it...its mystery is doomed to stay whole, inviolate" (Wiesel 1978, p198).

Although Steiner recognises that an event like the Holocaust assumes an archetypal proportion for all, he asks "Does any writer, does any human being other than an actual survivor have the right to put on this death-rig?" More, forcefully he asks:

> In what sense does anyone, himself uninvolved and long after the event, commit a subtle larceny when he invokes the echoes and trappings of Auschwitz and appropriates an enormity of ready emotion to his own private design...stealing their deaths as well as their lives? (Steiner 1976, p305)

On the other hand, Steiner argues that those who were directly involved in the Holocaust have understandable trouble dealing with it imaginatively.

One might almost say that Steiner is critical of Holocaust literature because it does not do what, in effect, he considers it impossible to do, namely, create an aesthetic, imaginative response to such an inexpressible atrocity. Although few critics have challenged him directly on this self-contradictory assertion, a discussion of this paradox has been a starting point in many essays on the subject.

Steiner has also noted several problems in the literature of those who were not directly involved in the Holocaust. In the two essays, "Silence and the Poet" and "Dying is an Art," he appears inconsistent. In the more recent article, Steiner argued that Sylvia Plath's poems are indicative of the inadequacies of literature's response to the Holocaust, whereas a year earlier he had argued that her poems function as an effective outcry against the evil of the Holocaust (although at the same time he criticised her use of Holocaust imagery because she was not directly implicated in it) (Steiner 1967, pp53 & 295-302).

On the other hand, Norma Rosen, in "The Holocaust and the American Jewish Novelist," divides the Holocaust literature into two models: that written by witnesses themselves; and that which has been authored primarily by those who are "witnesses through the imagination." Clearly, there is no quarrel with the first type of writing; they, at any rate, can rely on the literal 'authority' of their actual experience. The testimony of witnesses has, in fact, been compared to a new sacred text (Rosen). The second model, according to Rosen, more often than not presents gross distortions and literary misuses of the Holocaust. In the view of this particular critic, the fact that the Holocaust has entered into the public domain has meant that it is subject to "all manner of whim and caprice" (Rosen p112). Likewise, Robert von Hallberg, in American Poetry and Culture: 1945-1980, observes that non-victims have "often tried to tap the Holocaust for images...but their efforts do not always escape the stain of presumption that this subject brings with it" (p77).

Milton Hindus is yet another author who has found that "such a subject could hardly be contained, certainly not by someone who had not

actually 'been there.' If even the expressions of survivors sometimes seemed to be little better than exploitative 'kitsch' and those of others more sincere and genuine proved repetitive, diminishing and sentimental, was it possible for a [non-victim] to do any better?" (Hindus, p31).

Many of the more recent critics, however, while maintaining a necessary sensitivity and awareness of the problematics involved in addressing the Holocaust, do not maintain that the subject can only be written about by survivors alone. Alvarez in "Sylvia Plath," for instance, does not object to her poetry on the Holocaust because she did not experience the event, as does Steiner. In fact, he finds the use of 'outside' events for expressing personal trauma a strength in her poetry. Referring to "Lady Lazarus," which employs a number of vivid images from the camps, he says: "what is remarkable about the poem is not the objectivity with which she handles such personal suffering. Instead, it is the very closeness of her pain which gives it a general meaning; through it she assumes the suffering of all modern victims" (Alvarez 1969, p53).

Arendt concurs that such authors who have not experienced the Holocaust and are just entering the cultural time and space could well make new, unforseen contributions (Barnouw, ix). James Young argues that limiting expression of the Holocaust to only non-victims would pose a danger similar to shrouding the Holocaust in silence:

> It is therefore surprising that its figurative use should then be critically sanctioned and made unavailable to all those for whom the Holocaust was not 'authentic' experience. For in absorbing these experiences and making them its own, language might be said to remember long after all of its authentic witnesses are gone....To remove the Holocaust from the realm of the imagination, however, to sanctify it and place it off-limits is to risk excluding it altogether from public consciousness. And this seems to be too high a price to pay for saving it from those who would abuse its memory in inequitable metaphor. Better abused memory in this case, which might then be critically qualified, than no memory at all (Young 1988, p145).

Indeed, it has already been argued that with all its ramifications, the Holocaust is more than strictly a Jewish tragedy. By the same token, the portrayal of this event in literature cannot be limited strictly to Jewish

authors. As Arendt suggested, opening the Holocaust to non-victim authors and using its material for more than documentation alone might allow for a rich variety of innovative and creative literature. At the same time, it also has to be acknowledged that such literature is particularly vulnerable to the kind of difficulties critics have already noted. Indeed it can safely be said that few other literary subjects contain, both directly and by implication, so many extra-literary (ie ethical or otherwise) dilemmas for the writer. For this reason alone, the poems of this thesis are worthy of examination for how the Holocaust has been incorporated into the poetic landscape, and the accompanying difficulties such use incurs.

9. New Poetry, New Criticism

Alan Berger, in "Ashes & Hope: The Holocaust in the Second Generation American Literature", describes a "new type" of poetry, written by non-victims, "the type that is written by...the kinds of survivors, those who were never there but know more than the outlines of the place." He goes on to argue that "decoding this literature serves to reveal much about the literary, psychosocial and theological dimension of post-Auschwitz culture in America." In the same place he asks "how does this generation write about the Shoa [Holocaust]? What are its distinctive images of the horror?" (p97). Releasing Holocaust literature from the private domain of actual survivors, James Young joins Berger & Arendt in suggesting that the question be changed from "should the Holocaust be used as a public image of reference" to "how has the Holocaust been used as a public image of reference?" (Young 1987, p146).

Given the emergence of imaginative Holocaust literature written by non-victims, and the questions and dilemmas such literature raises, the early critics have had to readjust, either implicitly or explicitly, their criteria for what in Holocaust literature is acceptable, and how it should be evaluated. This has posed even greater difficulties when, as was rapidly the case, the Holocaust began to enter the reservoir of mythic and symbolic images available to a wide variety of artists, and still more so when images of

Auschwitz began to appear in literature addressing matters outwardly unrelated to the Holocaust.

As we have already seen, George Steiner, among the earlier critics of Holocaust literature, wrote first from an extremely moral critical stance. He later became much more moderate, publishing in 1981 a controversial novel, The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.. In this novel, Adolf Hitler is captured in South America. This is a fictionalised account in direct conflict with the historical fact of Hitler's death, and requiring from the audience a considerable suspension of disbelief. In writing this novel, Steiner has clearly revised his views on both the acceptability of Holocaust literature and the necessity for realism and historical accuracy. However, Steiner generally continued to judge literature on the basis of pre-World War II literary and cultural standards, namely the adoption of a primarily ethical response to the problems of Holocaust literature. While he acknowledged that such standards are obsolete, he was unable to abandon pre-Holocaust and pre-1970 assumptions in his discussion of contemporary writers.

Langer argues that Alvarez, Adorno and Steiner overlook the depth of presentation in many novels, but like them, Langer evaluates Holocaust literature on the basis of historical accuracy. Susan Sontag, on the other hand, makes clear her rejection of such an approach in her long essay Against Interpretation; she is an aesthetician, not a moralist. She assesses a work of literature by its artistic presentation-- regardless of subject matter-- rather than by the virtues of its message and its verisimilitude. The question Sontag raises is whether one can ethically treat an event like the Holocaust as simply an aesthetic phenomenon. Few critics would answer this question so strongly affirmatively as does Sontag, as most critics view the Holocaust as a unique and singular event in history which cannot be disregarded when assessing the aesthetic merits of a work.

In "A Plea for Survivors," Elie Wiesel acknowledges some inconsistencies in his position as he discusses the literary response to the Holocaust, which has included a rejection of all literature on the Holocaust, a demand for historically accurate personally-based testimony, and an

acceptance of imaginative responses which perform a moral function. If what he says seems riddled by contradictions, that, he declares, is the nature of reality for the Holocaust survivor (Wiesel, 1978).

Because most writers and critics of the Holocaust literature are Jewish, there is unavoidably a high degree of often personal sensitivity which determines how a work will by and large be received. Gerald Stern, a critic and author writing the preface to Stewart Florsheim's Ghosts of the Holocaust: An Anthology of Poetry by the Second Generation, explains:

> I have to imagine that they are poems written not by Jews or about Jews and Germans, but by Armenian or Cherokee survivors, and I find myself then, I don't know why, able to perceive them more as poems, as works of art, may the dead forgive me, rather than as testimonies of unbearable suffering" (Florsheim, p17).

With the bulk of Holocaust literature no longer written by survivors or taking the form of testimony, it is difficult to find consensus among critics as to what Holocaust literature should be, or how it should be considered. The only thing upon which critics largely agree is that these new uses of the Holocaust in literature present a number of pitfalls and problematics for both writer and critic alike. Reviewing comments made by relevant critics on the special difficulties involved in judging Holocaust literature, Gloria Young, in her article "The Poetry of the Holocaust," acknowledges that "It is difficult to read this poetry and even more difficult to judge it by ordinary literary criteria" (in Friedman, p550). In Ezrahi's comprehensive book By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature, she summarises the variety of forms and themes in that literature, criticising much of it. However, Ezrahi does not go so far as to suggest what direction the literature should be taking. Rosenfeld also has written on the wide variety of literary responses arising out of the Holocaust. He believes that Holocaust literature is important essentially for the knowledge we get from it. Yet in none of his essays does he identify exactly what the literature teaches us. Furthermore, he focuses on individual works separately, in contrast to his claim that this should not be done.

Kremer remarks on the extreme difficulty in writing about the Holocaust-- to "devise a means of presenting material for which there is no adequate analogue in human history and a subject that many believe is beyond art. There is no archetypal or familiar model, no literary touchstone, no exemplar for Holocaust fiction" (Kremer, p13), and Stern can only exclaim "the subject is so overwhelmingly difficult to write about" (in Florscheim, p18). Hindus finds "an abyss of cliche, propaganda and editorialism on the subject which even the wariest writer might have difficulty in avoiding (Hindus, p31), while Robert Jay Lifton, in his book on Hiroshima, refers to a "creative guilt" among writers of A-bomb literature which is equally applicable to Holocaust writers: "What happens with the A-bomb is not that the event becomes rendered so historically sacred that recreating it in any form can be psychologically perceived as hubris by both artists and their audiences" (Lifton, p473). Finally, Gloria Young, writing in 1993, characterises her vision of "good" Holocaust poetry in a manner which almost returns to the early "testimony" non-literature championed by Wiesel and Steiner:

> In the best of the poetry the diction is bare, and the word is naked, wearing no embellishments. By academic standards, some of the poetry would seem to be nonpoetry, a documentary recital of events...The imagery is not literary but realistic: ovens, smoke, barbed wire, chimneys, hunger, pits, stench, cold, fire, ash, dust, grave, stone, crows, wound, blood. Often there is little evidence of poetic craft..." (in Friedman, p551).

In one of the few articles on the subject, Brian Murdoch in "Transformation of the Holocaust: Auschwitz in Modern Lyric Poetry" points out that images derived "from the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps have become commonplace in much modern lyric poetry, in a manner that does not hold true for other large-scale crimes against humanity" (Murdoch p123). Murdoch also notes that the poetic images based on the camp landscape have assumed symbolic value remarkably rapidly. "Ash" and "barbed wire," for example, have effectively become twentieth-century emblems in the space of a half dozen years or so.

A surprising number of poets who have established themselves since the Second World War associate the landscape of the death camp with self, death and art in the way that the signs of nature-- symbolised in the skylark, the nightingale and the wind-- were associated with self, death, life and art by the Romantic poets. The images of the concentration camps have become part of the mythic storehouse of contemporary poets; the artist is thrust into a system of symbols stemming from the Nazis that have as Alvarez indicates, "an existential meaning beyond politics or shock or pity. They have become symbols of our inturned nihilism" (Alvarez 1969, p28). The events of the Holocaust have led to a new imagery, a landscape of violence and unreason employed by many contemporary poets. James Young describes the power and employment of the Holocaust in terms of its singularity: "Because the suffering of the Holocaust was not like anything else, it became a referent, a standard, by which all subsequent suffering was then measured" (Young 1987, p141).

Critics of Holocaust literature, although still divided as to whether to accept and how to interpret this new literature, were quick to recognise that literature, and poetry on the death camps in particular, was forever changed as a result of the extermination of the Jews. Echoing conclusions made earlier in comparing the impact of the two world wars and the Holocaust on the humanist ideals, Rosenfeld, after lengthy discussion, concludes that "the human imagination after Auschwitz is simply not the same as it was before" (1980, p13). Kremer explains in more detail that:

> Just as the Holocaust was beyond normal human experience, so too is the imaginative recreation of it demands, many believe, a language and literature somehow different from that which expressed pre-Holocaust suffering. The aesthetic problem is to find language appropriate to the Nazi universe, language to convey a bureaucracy of evil...never before has humanity, and literature, encountered evil in the magnitude of the Holocaust. Such desolation, it has been argued, requires a new artistic style, a new language (p29).

The challenge to find this language to describe the indescribable, particularly after the Nazi propaganda and rhetoric had so horrendously twisted and abused the German language, is of central importance to

authors and critics alike approaching Holocaust literature. For the majority of Holocaust poets, Holocaust survivors whose mother tongue is German such as Paul Celan, a core issue is the contamination of the German language. For later American poets a primary difficulty lies in finding any words to express what to many is-- and should remain-- indescribable. Alvarez in "The Literature of the Holocaust" asserts that finding language to express this "world without values, with its meticulously controlled lunacy and bureaucracy of suffering" presents a serious difficulty for the writer (p68). Langer goes further to claim "the transfiguration of post-Holocaust reality necessitates first of all revision, an inversion, a deliberate reconstitution of the language employed to portray it" (p203)

Poets have responded to this call for a new literary language after the Holocaust. It is precisely for this reason that so much of post-Holocaust literature is of special interest to us. An altered world-view is reflected in changed poetic forms, in a new concept of the role of the poet, and in new personae adopted in poetry. These departures will, among much else, be further considered alongside the development of confessional poetry, particularly when discussion turns to individual poets like Stephen Berg and Van Brock. In the meantime, however, with images of the Holocaust finding increasing application within the artistic media, two important questions must be addressed: to what extend is art an appropriate medium to respond to atrocity, and what expectations or injunctions can be placed upon how these responses are made?

The debate on the acceptability of creating art from atrocity must carefully balance itself between a faith in art and its humanistic power, and the severe negation of all artistic response pronounced by Adorno and others. Alvarez, perhaps clinging to a past era, suggests the former view, that only art can restore the moral values which would make further atrocities impossible. He insists that art must make us face extreme violence. Art has, he believes, a restorative power that can counter the genocidal imperative. At the same time, he claims that this can only be done if, in writing of the camps, authors take "the utterly psychopathic as his

norm, and make art out of the form of anti-art" (Alvarez 1969, p26). Steiner also allows for artistic representations for other reasons: even more than testimony, he recognises "the capacity of poetry [of the Holocaust] to give to reality the greater permanence of the imagined" (p190)

The name of Adorno is generally used to trumpet the opposing opinion, although he wrote many of his essays on the Holocaust in the 1950s and 1960s, before much of the imaginative American Holocaust literature had been written, and some of his views are problematic or contradictory. Although he is convinced that the terrors of the Holocaust must be recounted in literature in order that they will not be forgotten, he contends that they were so horrendous that writing poetry after the Holocaust is an abomination (Adorno, p125). Since art entails aesthetic pleasure, to create art out of suffering is, in effect, reprehensible. For Adorno, the Nazi evil permeates everything.

Adorno's second objection to creating a work of art on the Nazis and their camps is the possibility that fitting Nazi behaviour into artistic structure will give it a meaning and order it does not have; it would, then, be a misrepresentation of horror. He argues, for example, that the artistic autonomy of Picasso's Guernica works against the presentation of the calamity that it is based upon by making a superbly integrated artistic whole out of the shambles of a massacre. Adorno finds this inappropriate and worthy of condemnation because the work's intended effect is undercut by artful execution (recent criticisms of the film "Schindler's List" have presented the same view). Lawrence Langer agrees with Adorno on this point: "There is something disagreeable, almost dishonourable, in the conversion of the suffering of the victims into works of art, which are then...thrown as fodder to the world that murdered them. (Langer 1975, p1).

Finally, Adorno presents an additional reason why art and atrocity of this scale may be incompatible: he is fearful that the artist's effort to assimilate the Holocaust into an artform may do him harm, for what went on in the camps, he insists, is an experience beyond artistic expression (Adorno, p127-128). Young also questions whether bringing the Holocaust

into poetry does psychic damage to the poet. Steiner pronounces that "he who handles the material does so at his peril" (Steiner 1976, p305), and Alvarez observes that "the result of handling it in work may well be that he finds himself living it out" (Alvarez 1972, p38).

It is difficult to evaluate Adorno's argument on the morality of making "art out of suffering"; others have also objected to the use of science, technology and medical treatments, which regularly save lives today, but whose development was at the price of Jewish blood. Adorno's argument that an artistic representation will do an injustice to history by necessarily understating the atrocity is a valid one, and will be addressed further with regard to a body of poetry which, sometimes indiscriminately, draws upon the Holocaust to express instances of suffering, oppression and injustice not related to the Holocaust itself. Finally, although it should be no reason for condemnation, the number of authors for whom the Holocaust played a significant role in their writing and who later ended their lives by suicide, is quite alarming. It includes Plath, Sexton, Celan, Levi, Jarrell, Berryman and Pagis. The exact nature of the link, of course, can never be known, although some points made by Alfred Alvarez in his study of this subject in The Savage God: A Study of Suicide will be addressed later.

Given the weighty arguments addressing the use of the Holocaust in art, it is not surprising that no matter how this event is employed in literature, the very nature of the subject-matter involves the author in special responsibilities, affecting both the form and content of an author's work.

Although Langer is not as critical as Adorno or Steiner on much of the literature that employs images of the Holocaust, he makes even greater demands on the issues and themes such literature confronts. He argues that in the literature of atrocity one may "seek sustenance for the 'inner imagery' which permits the individual to endure" (Langer 1978, p16). In a time when thousands are murdered anonymously, according to Langer, it is by studying the literature that responds to such death that we can re-evaluate humanity's power to endure. For Langer, art is the last frontier against death, and with his faith in the restorative power of art comes an

obligation he believes authors have to apply themselves to life-affirming subjects.

Like Langer, Rosenfeld has very high expectations of the literature of the Holocaust, but more often from a religious or moral point of view. In the opening essay to a collection of essays he co-edited, Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel, Rosenfeld comments:

> Holocaust literature at its heart of hearts is revelatory in some new way, although of what we do not yet know. We must acknowledge, however, that it returns us to biblical revelation in newly compelling and urgently critical ways, which forces us to rethink all received truths about God and man and world under the pressure of history's worst crime...(Rosenfeld 1978, p25).

This view may be asking too much from literature, representing perhaps a desire for the "sacred text" of testimony prevalent a generation before. It does, in any case, severely limit how the Holocaust may be acceptably employed, and guards against its trivialisation or indiscriminate application in poetry. Lou Wieseltier and Emil Fackenheim focus more on the poet him- or herself, rather than the specific contexts in which he or she employs the Holocaust. Leon Wieseltier, in his review of Dorothy Rabonowicz's New Lives: Survivors of the Holocaust, writes:

> I do not mean to lift the Holocaust out of the reach of art. Adorno was wrong-- poetry *can* be made after Auschwitz and out of it...But it cannot be done without hard work and rare resources of the spirit. Familiarity with the hellish subject must be earned, not presupposed (p20).

Emil Fackenheim, in particular, reporting to the Cultural Department of the World Jewish Congress, argues "each and every explanation is false, if not downright obscene, unless it is accompanied by a sense of utter inadequacy" (p26). Finally, Gloria Young concludes that when dealing with the Holocaust, "Poetry with such a subject verges on the obscene. Still, the poems are here, like a veil between the reader and the dead, and should be read respectfully, with compassion and humility, as one would listen to a dying person's words" (in Friedman, p554). In addition to Fackenheim and Wieseltier, Alvarez, Adorno, Rosenfeld, Alexander, Steiner and Ezrahi all

address in some way the special responsibility the writer has in dealing with the Holocaust, assuming a moral obligation is not just entailed by, but is the primary purpose for any contact with this subject.

As mentioned previously, one of the few critics of Holocaust literature who views Holocaust art as having more than a moral function is Susan Sontag. Although she has not written extensively on this subject, she has made one representative statement on Rolf Hochhuth's The Deputy. Although she sees it as an important play because of "its fidelity to the truth and, by the relevance of the truth which it tells" she argues that "not all the works of art which successfully perform a moral function greatly satisfy as art" (Sontag, p127), and that this is the shortcoming of The Deputy. Taking a position diametrically opposed to that of Rosenfeld and Ezrahi, she faults the play for its lack of stylistic strength in Hochhuth's use of free verse in a modern play and in the "thick chunks of documentation" placed in the play. She goes on to say that if the play is "tremendously moving it is because of the weight of its subject, not because of its style or dramaturgy..." (p129). As stated previously, Sontag, therefore, stands almost alone in her judgement of the artistic presentation of the Holocaust based more on its aesthetic value than moral. To most critics, when images of the Holocaust are invoked, the subject matter cannot be divorced from the ethical implications of its use and misuse.

10. Holocaust as Fact versus Holocaust as Metaphor

One of the most important distinctions which has been made in evaluating Holocaust poetry is based on whether a poem makes a direct statement on the Holocaust, with Auschwitz being its subject, or whether Auschwitz is a metaphor for something else. Many critics still adamantly hold the view that, because of its singular and almost sacred nature, the Holocaust is beyond all metaphor, and any employment of its imagery in reference to non-Holocaust subjects is a serious abuse. Given that the true memories of survivors are kept very much alive, applying the Holocaust as metaphor to other instances of oppression, suffering or injustice might seem

a grave insult. David Aberbach, in Surviving Trauma, a study of literature's response to atrocity, observes that "In this literature, one is faced with the paradox that the experiences of survivors cannot be reduced to literature or compared with the experiences of others" (Aberbach, p1). However, as the Holocaust necessarily began to inform all writers' literary imagination, James Young asks if it is ever possible to separate the "private" interpretations and applications of the Holocaust from the "historical." James Young comments on this dilemma imposed by the archetypal status of the Holocaust: "It is ironic that once an event is perceived to be without precedent, without adequate analogy, it would in itself become a kind of precedent for all that follows: a new figure against which subsequent experiences are measured & grasped (Young 1988, p99).

This conflict, therefore, provides a rich source for criticism of American attempts at incorporating the Holocaust into poetry: whether the subject is important or "worthy" enough for comparison to the Holocaust, and whether the Holocaust can be compared to anything at all.

Langer says this is bound to change with time, as the Holocaust passes beyond historical memory and Auschwitz and Treblinka become "mere place names as obscure to their audiences as Borodino and Tagliamento are to Tolstoy's and Hemingways' readers today." But "the urgency of the historical event continues to exert its mysterious power over modern consciousness," particularly with a whole culture devoted to keeping the memory alive. Literature generalises human experience, while the events of atrocity we call the Holocaust insist on their singularity. The imagination seeks to link the two, to find a bridge through metaphor, image, a language of connection. But the Holocaust has impurified language in a way that prevents this from happening (Langer 1990, p122).

Cynthia Ozick, in "A Liberal's Auschwitz" states most forcefully a position held many Jewish critics: "Jews are not metaphors-- not for poets, not for novelists, not for theologians, not for murderers, and never for antisemites" (Ozick, p127). Ezrahi explains some of the reasons for someone like Ozick's injunction:

> When the vocabulary of the events of 1933-1945 is applied to any situation of intense emotional or social privation, the enormity and the moral inadmissibility of the concentrationary experience are diluted even as the widespread symbolic assimilation of the experience is achieved (in Friedman, p177).

Finally, Neil Postman warns that:

> There are two intertwined reasons that make it possible to trivialise traditional symbols. The first, as neatly expressed by the social critic Jay Rosen, is that, although symbols, especially images, are endlessly repeatable, they are not inexhaustible. Second, the more frequently a significant symbol is used, the less potent is its meaning (Postman, p165).

These critics fear that through its abuse the meaning of the Holocaust will be diluted, and the Jewish promise to "never forget" will become trivialised. James Young warns that using the Holocaust metaphorically will "risk a dilution of these experiences, or an escape or transcendence of them through metaphor" (Young 1988, p104). Friedman even quotes the Spanish critic Jose Ortega y Gasset, who noted metaphor's ability "to both satisfy the urge to escape and dilute reality" (in Friedman, p91), and Rosenfeld argues that "The function of metaphorical language of this kind is to compare one thing with another not so much from an urge to get at the first but to get rid of it" (Rosenfeld 1980, p288).

For Rosenfeld, any writing on the Holocaust that does not directly treat the frightful fate of Hitler's victims not only has little value, but, worse than that, is a distortion of reality. He argues quite strongly that the Holocaust is beyond metaphor and that a text addressing it must serve to clarify it in order to be valid:

> There are no metaphors for Auschwitz just as Auschwitz is not a metaphor for anything else...Why is this the case? Because the flames were real flames, the ashes only ashes, the smoke always and only smoke. If one wants 'meaning' out of that, it can only be this: at Auschwitz, humanity incinerated its own heart. Otherwise the burnings do not lend themselves to metaphor, simile or symbol-- to likeness or association with anything else. They can only 'be' or 'mean' what they in fact were: the death of the Jews (Rosenfeld 1980, p29).

Similarly, in explaining his documentary approach, Rolf Hochhuth argues that the Holocaust has

> overleapt the bounds of metaphor....For metaphors still screen the infernal cynicism of what really took place-- a reality so enormous and grotesque that even today...the impression of unreality it produced conspires with our natural strong tendency to treat the matter as a legend, as an incredible apocalyptic fable (Hochhuth, pp222-223).

The fact that such demands are not normally made on literary works does not influence him for he claims that to do anything but explore the meaning of the Holocaust directly is "to exploit atrocity by misappropriating it for private or political ends. All such efforts at 'adapting' the Holocaust are bound to fail-- artistically, for reasons of conceptual distortion, and morally, for misusing the sufferings of others" (Rosenfeld 1980, p54). He believes that the atrocity is inextricably bound to the moral issue and that the former cannot be judged apart from the latter. This link between the quality of expression and the morality of a piece is also made by most other critics of this subject.

Friedman amplifies and explains this position:

> Since the transmission of facts in Holocaust writing still dominates this literature's function for so many writers, and since metaphor cannot directly transmit these facts, many critics still regard metaphor as not only ineffective but even dangerous for representing the Holocaust. In purporting to present the facts, they would say, Holocaust metaphors can ultimately do no more than falsify the facts and, therefore, deceive the readers (Friedman, p132).

Of course, not all critics agree with this position. In an argument similar to James Young's response to those advocating silence as the most appropriate response, Friedman finds that the injunction against figurative references to the Holocaust

> neglects the necessity of metaphor to convey meaning, to allow interpretative activity and tension. To leave Auschwitz outside of metaphor would be to leave it outside of language altogether: it was known, understood and responded to at all times by its victims; it had been organised, expressed and interpreted metaphorically by its writers; and now it *is* being remembered, commented upon, and given historical meaning metaphorically by scholars and poets of the next generation. If carried to its literal end, an injunction against Auschwitz metaphor would place events outside language and meaning altogether, thereby mystifying the Holocaust and accomplishing after the fact what the Nazis had hoped to accomplish through their own-- often metaphorical-- mystification of events (Friedman, p91).

In 1979 the non-Jewish Southern writer William Styron made the Holocaust the motive force in Sophie's Choice, which was given immediate critical attention, became a bestseller and gained further exposure as a movie. His treatment of the Holocaust is an illustrative "test case" for two complementary reasons. First, it raises many of the dilemmas inherent in attempts to generalise the Holocaust and common to the poetic responses of this time. Second, as Sophie's Choice was so popular and widely known, it has attracted a wide volume of critical response on the subject of Styron's use of the Holocaust, a critical response, moreover, which can be applied to poetry presenting the same dilemmas, even though the latter has attracted less critical attention.

Among others, Berger, for instance, criticises Sophie's Choice for its attempt to "divert attention from the Shoa as epoch-making event, focusing instead on various personal motives" (Berger p99). Not surprisingly, Rosenfeld also finds Styron's Sophie's Choice exploitative and distorting. Rosenfeld objects to what he sees as Styron's "universalising" of the Holocaust. He makes the chief victim a Polish Catholic woman who, in addition, is mistreated by a Jew. Rosenfeld argues that "To generalise the victims of the Holocaust is not only to profane their memories but to exonerate their executioners, who by the same line of thinking...also disappear into the midst of faceless mankind" (Rosenfeld 1980, p160). He also objects to what he sees here as the reduction of the Holocaust to the erotic ramifications of a woman who has been mutilated by her experience in Auschwitz.

Sophie's Choice is a novel that makes a strong statement of its own but does not fulfil Rosenfeld's special expectation of primarily informing the reader about the Holocaust. Rosenfeld's view may appear, however, as somewhat rigid and narrow. It could be counter-argued that Styron's statement against the Holocaust is so forceful precisely because he "universalises" it. If the singularity of the Holocaust precluded all comparisons, most readers would not have the imagination to be able to respond to its meaning. In addition, the irony of the victim being a Catholic

who is later oppressed by a schizophrenic Jew forces the reader not to take for granted Hitler's destruction of the Jews. The reversal of roles calls additional attention to the inherent madness in Hitler's plan. One might also argue against Rosenfeld's objection to sexuality in the novel, for Styron's portrayal of sexual perversity in the death camps and in the sado-masochistic relationship between Sophie and Nathan may be a valid insight into one of the psychological underpinnings of fascism, a theme which will also be explored through the poetry of Snodgrass. Finally, Rosenfeld also ignores several central themes in the novel. One example is the narrator's guilt concerning his grandparents' owning slaves. There is an implicit comparison in the book between slavery in the United States and the camps in Europe.

Written with the German concentration camps as a backdrop, Sophie's Choice touches upon issues and images of sado-masochism, sexual perversity, the fascist psychology, male-female politics, the civil rights struggle & other social upheavals and the need to exorcise an oppressive post-Holocaust guilt. Each of these topics has also been addressed through reference to the Holocaust in modern American poetry, and makes up the bulk of the non-testimonial responses to the Holocaust in poetry.

11. Confessional Poetry and the Holocaust

Beginning in the early 1970s images of Auschwitz began to appear in the poetry of a number of American poets. The images either convey the theme of the Holocaust, or are used as metaphors to address unrelated issues. Confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton first employed images of the world of the death camps extensively. The poetry of Maxine Kumin and Stephen Berg would later include these images. Other poets with a strong political or social orientation such as Denise Levertov and Adrienne Rich would express atrocity in terms of the Holocaust. Finally the Holocaust would be a major theme in the poetry of Van Brock, William Heyen, W.D. Snodgrass and Charles Reznikoff. Clearly

the focus on the Holocaust in the United States has not been limited to one specific group of poets.

However, some generalisations can be applied to the bulk of Holocaust poetry; many of the new themes and departures sparked by the Holocaust and Second World War have already been discussed. Another development, closely linked to the new "literature of the imagination" on the Holocaust, has also broadly affected poets in America, and certainly those included in this study. Confessional poetry has become a main current in American poetry in the late 1950s and has prevailed into the 1970s and 1980s. Most well-received poems by post-modern poets are confessional in the sense defined below. M.L. Rosenthal first used the term "confessional poetry" in a review of Robert Lowell's Life Studies in 1959. It was used to distinguish Lowell's recent poems from the earlier ones which reflected the poetics of the New Critics and Eliot. Rosenthal later elaborated on the theme of confessional poetry in his important book, The New Poets, through discussion of Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and John Berryman.

Although as early as the mid-1950s Ginsberg had written what was later considered confessional poetry, the fact that both Life Studies and Snodgrass' Heart's Needle appeared in 1959 has meant that this date has often been associated with the birth of confessional poetry. Not only were these accomplished works in themselves but they also had a tremendous effect on younger poets. Anne Sexton, who had been one of Lowell's students at Boston University, claimed that Snodgrass' painful exploration in Heart's Needle of his separation from his daughter because of his divorce, a central theme in the book, opened up new possibilities for poetry. Plath, who sometimes sat in on Lowell's classes, was inspired by his four-part Life Studies, which merges private and public experience in its treatment of war, the return home after the war experience, art and the poet's madness (Stevenson, pp150-152).

In addition to the focus on private experience, confessional poetry is a radical departure from the New Critical approach to poetry in other

aspects. Structure is even more relaxed, the individual poem is not meant to be read in isolation but as part of a series, and finally the poet's ordered voice is sometimes lost in his outburst. This departure is especially significant because it was not the result of one poet's dominance but, as Malkoff observes, "a series of nearly contemporary independent discoveries..." (Malkoff 1973, p89).

The development of this mode of poetry predates by several years the American awareness of the Holocaust. However, the structure and style of this poetry is well suited to, and almost invites, incorporation of the Holocaust; it is therefore less surprising how soon the Holocaust attained such symbolic power in non-victims' writing, once the Holocaust entered the American consciousness during the years following the 1961 Eichmann trial. It is significant to note that, with the exception of Lowell, the earlier major poets in this group-- Sexton, Plath and Snodgrass-- and several later poets have drawn heavily upon the horrifying film images which documented the Final Solution and the reports from the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials. In fact, a tradition of Holocaust poetry has been established in a very few years. In addition, Brian Murdoch points out in "Transformations of the Holocaust: Auschwitz in Modern Lyric Poetry" that many of these poems have much imagery in common (Murdoch, p124).

This overlapping between the confessional poets and poets employing Holocaust imagery is not accidental. It is the result of a strong desire to write about the darker sides of the unconscious or about man's evil; hence the employment of similar imagery.

The question of how confessional poetry should be defined is a difficult one. It is most often distinguished from other kinds of poetry by its private subject matter-- personal emotions that are expressed frankly and honestly. The assumption that subjects such as one's marriage, divorce, sex drive and desire for death are good subjects for poetry clearly disregards Eliot's early argument for impersonality and his harsh attack against what he considered to be a personal utterance such as Whitman's (McDonald).

Whitman, who wrote a hundred years ago, is considered by some a confessional poet. In several respects, he may be, but there is a major difference between his poetry and that of the mid-twentieth century American poets: Whitman's "I" is not so much the expression of the feeling peculiar to the poet as it is the expression of what the poet considers true of "us." Although it may readily be granted that much of this is a result of his individual view, his "I" is democratic, populist: it is representative of "us."

One might also be tempted, as Malkoff suggests, to call the Roman love poet Catullus, and the seventeenth-century English poet Donne confessional poets. However, a major distinction exists between such lyric poets and the so-called confessional poets. The Roman lyric poets, and to an even greater extent the seventeenth-century lyric poets, assumed personae. Most often, they were characters in easily recognisable and typical situations such as the one of a young man who tries to seduce a modest woman. The puns, elaborate metaphors and verbal dexterities are as interesting as the ostensible subject of the poem. Poems by Herrick, Donne and Marvell may be on the same subject, but their wit is the poems' signature. Mid-century confessional American poetry is not usually structurally complex. Its emphasis is most often on the unique qualities of the poet's life and vision. If a confessional poet were to write a seduction poem, the focus would not be on the ingenuity of the argument presented by a man in this situation but on the "I's" private desires and fears.

Some critics argue that confessional poetry is severely limited by the poet's obsession with self. From this point of view, when the poem alludes to something outside the poet, such as a historical event, this reveals something about the "I" and has no other meaning. Other critics, who are more sympathetic, argue that historical allusions not only reveal something about the persona but also the poet's concept and opinion of these events (Annas, p17). This argument roughly parallels the critical conflicts concerning the emergence of Holocaust fiction, non-victims' contribution and metaphorical uses. A main issue of debate between these two groups of critics has been whether or not Sylvia Plath's calling herself a Jew and her

father a Nazi in her well-known poem "Daddy" is a self-indulgent presentation of herself or is an expression of her own view of the Nazi-Jew relationship.

Karl Malkoff takes a kind of compromise position. He argues that the relationship between the speaker and the choice of images in poems by Plath and others carries an additional meaning. Confessional poets differ from other poets who write on personal subjects in that the poet's identity is lost within a web of images. Ironically, although the poems are written in the first person, they chart the poet's loss and disintegration of self; a pattern which lends itself well to the poetry of and after the Holocaust. Malkoff argues that the legitimacy of confessional poetry is that "the boundaries between the self and the outer reality have themselves been brought into question" (Malkoff 1973, p89). Such poetry, therefore, may be thought of as egocentric but not egoistic. Self is central and the expression of its disintegration is a result of the poet's frankness.

Probably the reason many poets writing in this mode draw on the Holocaust is that the Nazi threat to humanity and humanism is the most powerful recent historical analog to the outer world's inroad on the self, and this is intuited by the poets. Clearly, history has penetrated consciousness. Even if one rejects Malkoff's view of the underlying psychology of the poet's honesty and abandonment to the irrational, the choice of images of the Holocaust in so many poems is indicative of its immediate impact. There does seem to be a correlation between the personal subjective voice and the consideration of these violent events in recent history.

This so-called "confessional" poetry is the uninhibited voice that does not explain but simply admits, and that does not describe order in that world so much as disorder in the persona of the poet and in the world. Most confessional poetry is not simply autobiographical since it includes images from and allusions to the world outside the poet. Nonetheless, it represents a radical departure from Eliot's view of history and tradition.

One of the first confessional poets, Karl Shapiro, had been influenced by Eliot. However, concurrently with the appearance of his confessional

poems in the late 1950s, he began to attack Eliot's anti-Semitism and reject his evaluating modern poetry in terms of tradition in British poetry. At this same time Shapiro associated himself as a poet with a consciousness of his Jewishness. Beyond that, he associated Jewishness with the Holocaust: The Jew, according to Shapiro, is "man essentially himself, beyond nationality, defenceless against the crushing impersonality of history." This image, he continues, was revived by the "hideous blood purge of the Jews by Germany in the twentieth century." This link is reinforced by his reference to a quotation by Paul Celan, perhaps the most famous Holocaust poet, that "all poets are Jews" (Shapiro 1958, px). Certainly, given the ravages done by the Holocaust to the writer's faith in humanism, and the particular characteristics of the self in confessional poetry, Celan's statement may well apply. However, an author's presumption in and authority for holding such a view has been hotly contested, as will be addressed in the case of Sylvia Plath. Nevertheless, the significant point here is that one of the first confessional poets suggests that there is a connection between his rejection of Eliot, acceptance of a new poetry, and the Holocaust, and later confessional poets are quick to confront the challenges a poetry of the Holocaust presents.

The connection between confessional poetry and the Holocaust is also suggested through the appearance of Holocaust images in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. They did not try to find reason in the world and instead focus on the disorder in their own consciousness. Plath, for example, vividly defines her relationship to her dominating father in terms of the Nazi brutality that literally consumed the Jews. W.D. Snodgrass, another student of Robert Lowell, who established the groundwork for confessional poetry, presents in The Fuhrer Bunker, a series of dramatic monologues by Hitler and other high-ranking Nazis. Other students of Lowell and poets affected by the trend toward confessional poetry such as William Heyen, Van Brock, Adrienne Rich, Stephen Berg, Maxine Kumin and Denise Levertov have also treated the Holocaust.

In Escape From Self, a study of confessional poetry, Malkoff declares that after the Second World War the interior world of the poet now replaces a quest for external order. "Contemporary American poetry," he argues, "can be understood as a series of attempts to reintegrate the relation of man's inner world to the perceptual universe" (Malkoff 1977, p40). This reorientation also represents a rejection of Eliot's insistence on poetry that is impersonal and intellectual. Now, relying on his emotions and interior world, the poet surrenders the organising principle, the ego, the powerful "poetic voice," and speaks with a personal voice on an outside world that has no more order than the quirks of an individual consciousness.

Malkoff believes that a "disintegration of the self is crucial to the Confessional vision of reality" and that the poet's role thus becomes "almost sacrificial." Furthermore, he declares that it is a "descent into the underworld that seems almost a defining characteristic of modern Confessional poetry" (Malkoff 1977 p95). The poet is not a spokesman for humanity but a survivor of the Holocaust within.

A common subject of confessional poetry, according to Malkoff, is "the myth of the self, which reaches inward to archetypal patterns of unconscious and outward to the shared experiences of the poet's society, rather than the objective actions of the arbitrary isolated individual" (Malkoff, 1977 p126). The frequency with which the Holocaust appears in contemporary poetry suggests a common consciousness of it. The Nazi destruction of the Jews has assumed a mythic significance; it is a cataclysmic event that also, oddly enough, parallels poetic archetypes.

There are analogies not only between the role of the survivor and the psychological underpinnings of the poet's relationship to his poems, as noted above, but also between the survivor and the poet's persona, the particular voice he speaks through. The image of the survivor is an increasingly important symbol of the twentieth-century hero or anti-hero. He goes through a rite of passage involving the loss of his home and family, and he is left mutilated in an existential crisis. A figure drawn from history assumes an anti-heroic stature and in some poems become symbolic of the

human condition. Given this development, particularly in the case of Plath and Sexton, whether the poet identifies with the oppressor or the victim provides an informative distinction in evaluating their poetry.

Ries, like Malkoff, perceives in contemporary poetry a stripping away of the authority of the self. Malkoff views it almost as a voluntary shedding by the poet so that the interior ordering of reality surfaces, whereas Ries finds it less voluntary and more a result of the chipping away of the identity and authority of the individual by the violent outer world. The concentration camp inmate is once again analogous in the poet.

In an article which was first published in 1970, "The Literature of the Holocaust," Alvarez clarifies the assumptions behind his evaluation of confessional poetry. He accepts Norman Mailer's thesis, stated previously, that the violence of contemporary society is a threat to the identity of the artist; the violence and lack of character of mass culture does not correlate with previous forms of art so that contemporary artists have been forced to define themselves and their art in a new way. They may be like the Holocaust survivor because, as Alvarez says, the Holocaust is an emblem for our age.

Alvarez was one of the first critics to argue that the poetry of the confessional poets is not an art of self-indulgence. In The Savage God: A Study of Suicide-- a book on the history of society's responses to suicide, suicide in literature, and the causes of suicide-- he points out some of the psychological underpinnings common in societal tendencies and the qualities in literature on suicide. Alvarez concludes that the artist is more sensitive than most other members of society and that in order to convey the violence of the modern world, "he puts himself at risk and explores his own vulnerability" (Alvarez 1972, p241). The artist, therefore, in a sense sacrifices him or herself and creates in his or her poetry a microcosm of the world.

This kind of presentation is characteristic of what Alvarez terms "Extremist Art" as opposed to "Totalitarian Art," which "tackles the historical situation frontally, more or less brutally, in order to create a human

perspective for a dehumanising process." This is what is commonly termed the art of commitment, where the artist directly confronts his or her audience and tries to convince it that some change is needed. In "Extremist Art" the destruction is "all turned inward and the artist deliberately explores in himself that narrow, violent area between the visible and the impossible, the tolerable and the intolerable" (Alvarez 1972, p242).

After this observation, Alvarez finds that there is an analogous relationship between the artist and the mentality of the society that surrounds him or her. In addition, many artists' suicidal impulses and their treatment of it in art parallel a societal death-wish. Like Freud, Alvarez considers man and his civilisation torn between the desires for love and death. The concentration camp Jew is highly symbolic of man who has the desire for life but is caught in a manmade web of death. Sylvia Plath, who becomes a Jew in "Lady Lazarus," assumes a kind of psychological embodiment of modern existence. According to Alvarez, her death-wish is not indicative of a disturbed eccentric woman but of a poet who is particularly sensitive to contemporary life.

12. Sylvia Plath

This analogy between the threat of reality to the self-- the poet's vulnerability to the world-- and the Jewish slaughter by the Nazis was first suggested by Alvarez in "Sylvia Plath" in 1963. It is with Sylvia Plath that we will begin our examination of individual poets.

Plath, a confessional poet, embodies in her poetry many of the dilemmas and difficulties discussed above inherent to poetry involving the Holocaust. Furthermore, as one of the better-known American poets to have addressed the Holocaust, she has attracted a relatively large body of commentary and criticism regarding her use of the Holocaust explicitly, and it will not be necessary in her case to extrapolate from comparable criticisms made of prose.

Continuing with the theme of the poets' vulnerability to the world, Alvarez argues that Plath's later poems, which appear to be so personal, are

also about subjects outside herself. For example, in reference to "Lady Lazarus," a poem ostensibly about her urge toward suicide, he claims:

> But what is remarkable about the poem is the objectivity with which she handles such personal material. She is not just talking about her own private suffering. Instead, it is the very closeness of her pain which gives it general meaning. Through it she suffers the suffering of all modern victims (Alvarez 1969, p53).

In The New Poets: American & British Poetry Since World War II, M.L. Rosenthal also praises Plath. Like Ries and Hoffman, Rosenthal finds that there has been a change in poetry since the Second World War. The most striking poetry, he suggests, "has taken on a new coloration, in effect a new sense of unease and disorder" (Rosenthal 1967, p5). He claims that our culture is somehow blighted and that many vital poets are involved in the "exercise of an almost helpless identification and sympathy with the victimised psyche of the present cultural moment" and they insist on the poet's relationship to it as they "seek the way to transcendent meaning..." (p301).

This intermingling of personal material and the Holocaust is a hallmark of confessional poetry, and is evident in the poetry of Plath, Sexton and Kumin, the three primarily confessionalist poets who are considered in this study. However, although all Holocaust usage, and particularly the private uses invited by confessionalist poetry, invite dilemmas, Plath presents the biggest problem for critics, provokes the greatest outrage, and raises the biggest challenges to ideas of morality, authority and metaphor in Holocaust literature. She presents an extreme in her use of the Holocaust to which few poets compare, and as one of the best known of all American poets who have touched more than passingly upon the Holocaust, she could not easily be ignored.

Some critical controversy has been brewing since the mid-1960s as to whether or not Plath is a great poet or simply a disturbed personality who is obsessed with self (Phillips). Since her death, many critics have been laudatory. Beyond the poems and their interpretation, however, additional evidence suggests that Plath was not purely egocentric. She said, for

example, in a tape that was made to be broadcast (but apparently never was):

> I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences, I have....I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a...narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on (Orr, pp179-180).

In addition, her husband, Ted Hughes, claims that "the chemical poisoning of nature, the pile-up of atomic waste, were horrors that pursued her like an illness" (Lane, p228).

It is Sylvia Plath who, Ries feels, "may rightly be called the most natural child of the postwar temperament." Disagreeing with the critics of Holocaust literature who fault Plath for what they describe as trivialising the Holocaust, Ries argues that Plath accepts a "guilt by association...because of her participation in the imperfect humanity" and that this is "central to her consciousness" (Ries, pp13 & 43). While she assumes this guilt, she is also a victim of sorts: "perhaps no modern poet has been more aware of the forces of power and violence in the contemporary world," he concludes, "and their disintegrating effect on human identity" (Ries, p34).

Robert Phillips, author of The Confessional Poets which treats the poetry of Lowell, Snodgrass, Sexton, Berryman, Roethke and Plath, contends that the purpose and goal of confessional poetry are "self-therapy and a certain purgation." He is critical of this self-serving application of Holocaust imagery, and believed that Plath was psychologically disturbed so that she made "no distinction between her tragedy and those of Auschwitz and Nagasaki" (Phillips, pp8,128).

It is impossible to prove that Plath was not disturbed since she did commit suicide and had a history of mental breakdowns. Possibly because she was sick, the Holocaust and A-bomb victims played on her consciousness more than on that of the average person. This, however, does not reduce the importance of the fact that her best poetry, the later poems, are permeated with images of the Holocaust.

Furthermore, Plath's poems should not be dismissed because she may have been ill, since many of her contemporaries employ similar imagery. The obsession with the death images of the Holocaust transcends the warped consciousness of one poet. Consequently, Plath's poems are of great interest, and in their content and imagery have much in common with other American poets who have addressed the Holocaust in their poetry.

In Plath's work, unlike that of her contemporaries, the subject of the Holocaust is not limited to poems written from a particular point of view or particular theme. However, certain image-clusters do emerge. Most frequently, the annihilation of the Jews is associated with eating. Death is often associated with the image of the black telephone, blackness, hooks and clouds. In her works the themes of perfection, purity and Christian salvation are associated with references to the Holocaust.

What follows is a brief survey of the poems by Plath which more significantly touch upon the Holocaust, and then a discussion of the problems raised particularly by her more controversial poems in the posthumous volume Ariel. In her poetry, Plath illustrates many of the trends in post-Holocaust poetry. Her poetry presents the greatest internalisation of the Holocaust suffering, and most anguished personal outcry; for Plath, the Holocaust takes on a mythological status and the concentration camp experience takes on an allegorical role. More specifically, Plath struggles with many of the religious questions as to the good or evil in both man and God, and illustrates the poet-as-victim, as the speaker in the poems is eroded by the horrors of modern society.

In the early poems, the speaker describes something outside herself. In later poems, the speaker considers herself part of the irreducible signs of the liquidation of millions. One of the first poems on this subject, "The Thin People," in Colossus, is a meditation on the Holocaust survivors. The human landscape echoes Eliot's "The Hollow Men." Here it is not that "We are the stuffed men / We are the hollow men" who are spiritually sterile, but that they (the survivors) "are always with us, the thin people / Meagre of dimension as the gray people." These scapegoats in man's history are

Christ-like since they are "forever / Drinking vinegar from tin cups: [and] they wore / the insufferable nimbus of the lot-drawn / Scapegoat..." The Jews, historically persecuted by Christians and blamed for Christ's death, are compared to Christ in His suffering.

Another one of the poem's arguments is highly ironic. The survivors' inexorable intrusion into reality and consciousness is compared to the inevitability of an "old woman in her / mad hut /...cutting fat meat." Ironically, starved ghost-like people are associated with a woman's fatty dinner. Plath continues, they linger "in the sunlit room" and even "the trees flatten / And lose their golden browns / If the thin people simply stand in the forest." The poem is ambiguous. It presents the brutality the survivors have suffered, but it also reveals the speaker's resentment that she cannot escape her awareness of their suffering; their presence is overwhelming.

In later poems the intrusion is no longer simply external; the victims' experience is transferred to the speaker so that she is haunted by an emotional complex consisting of guilt and the desire for vengeance. In "The Thin People" this theme first emerges. After comparing the survivors to Christ, the speaker says that they make "the world go thin as a wasp's nest." The survivors suffer like Christ and every man is guilty. Unlike Christ, however, they suffer no salvation and their survival is a constant reminder to the world of its wrong.

In the early poems, Plath is ambivalent not only about the survivors, but also about Christ and the notion of salvation. "Brasilia," for example, after describing the destruction of masses of people as their bones are "nosing for distances," invokes a powerful force: "O You who eat / People like light rays," leave my son safe "unredeemed by the dove's annihilation, / The glory / The power, the glory." Ironically, to be unredeemed is to be saved. Another possible reading is also ironic, and that is that God is evil. The speaker assumes the fearful universal role of the mother begging for her child's life and she seems to be addressing God. Her role is allegorical rather than individual.

"Mary's Song," from Ariel, Plath's best-known book, presents an ambiguous speaker. Because of the title, it is possible to view the poem as an expression of the Virgin Mary's thoughts. She describes the destruction of the Jews in images that are suggestive of both medieval scourges and the Holocaust. The main image in the poem is fire. It begins, "The Sunday lamb crackles in its fat" and moves to "the same fire / Melting the tallow heretics, / Ousting the Jews. / Their thin palls float / Over the cicatrix of Poland." The speaker continues, "Mouth-ash, ash of eye. / They settle. On the high / Precipice / That emptied one man into space / The ovens glowed like heavens incandescent." Although the speaker had no actual role in the activity in Poland, on a symbolic level she resides in its centre: "It is a heart, this holocaust I walk in, / O golden child the world will kill and eat." As with "Brasilia," the Christian imagery is ambiguous. It may be argued that Plath is suggesting that, like Christ, the Jews were sacrificed because the Holocaust is compared to a heart, a symbol for Christ's sacrifice. However, because there are no images of salvation, and the image of fire (which is often used to represent the Paraclete) here symbolises the Holocaust and man's killing of Christ rather than His saving of man, the Christian concept of sacrifice is rendered ironic.

Sacrifice and devouring are associated and constitute a major theme in "Mary's Song." Christ is alluded to in "The Sunday Lamb [that] crackles in its fat" and in the ending, "O golden child, the world will kill and eat." The way of salvation is the total annihilation and consumption of Christ. Plath also associates the destruction of the Jews with images of devouring. Therefore she associates the sacrifice of Christ not only with the death of the Jews through the juxtaposition of heart and Holocaust, but also in their sharing this imagery. In other poems, it is the speaker who is sacrificed. What is accomplished by the horrible acts of devouring is difficult to interpret.

Jerome Mazzaro argues in "Sylvia Plath and the Cycles of History" that Plath's view of history is like Yeats' in certain respects in that it is characterised by stages and that for the movement from one to the other a purgation is necessary. The Jews in "Mary's Song," according to Mazzaro,

> are presented in language that deliberately recalls the "sages standing in God's holy fire" of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium." They burn until their being made translucent comes to be equated to Christ, and the speaker, like the Communion Host, is killed and eaten. The "meal" is possible, Plath maintains, because the world has not had its heart consumed away. The residual heart is the oven and Holocaust through which the Jews and the poem's speaker must both proceed (in Lane, p230).

In my reading, Mazzaro's explanation of the meal is not grounded in the poem. It is sufficient to say that these sacrifices do represent a kind of Yeatsian purgation, but it is not at all clear what their outcome is. Without salvation, or an affirmation, purgation is meaningless.

Another critic, Caroline Bernard, interprets the poem quite differently, but she does agree that Plath is prophetic and that in "Mary's Song" the devouring of Christ "suggests the sacrament of communion" (Barnard, p83). In addition, she argues that many of the later poems, which have a masochistic tone, intimate that through the speaker's sacrifice there is a purgation and a resultant betterment. This view, though defensible, has pitfalls. For example, the imagery and diction in "Mary's Song" suggest an ironic reading so that instead of an image of communion and grace, the reader is left figuratively holding a Host that will be fried in its own grease and eaten ravenously. This is doubtless the mournful message of the poem. Plath, who has written some of the most graphic descriptions of the Holocaust, here suggests that the Holocaust's meaning lies in the contrast between its horror and its lack of consequence.

A number of poems in Ariel present a tormented, suffering speaker who is sacrificed and purified. Plath suggests that the suffering is sheer futility with a benefit to no one or no thing. In "Getting There" the speaker describes her journey to a concentration camp. The wheels of the train appal her, and she asks: "what do these wheels eat..." Then she asks "How far is it" and "Will there be fire, will there be bread?" These images complement and amplify each other. Fire symbolises devouring, and bread is paradigmatic of that which is consumed. They are complementary in the sacrificial act. Plath also treats two other ideas as complementary: birth and

death. Stretchers for the dead "are cradles." The speaker, apparently on the verge of death, concludes, "And I stepping from the skin / Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces / Step to you from the black car of Lethe / Pure as baby." Just as these compliments are so well balanced, so too are image and theme. The poem supports two interpretations equally: its subject is the persona's self-concept; and it is also death at the camps.

Perfection and purity are associated with Nazism in another poem, "The Munich Mannequins." It begins, "Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children. / Cold is snow breath, it tamps the womb." Perfection is associated with the menses, when the moons are unloosed "month after month, to no purpose." Then the woman is as fruitful as a mannequin or corpse. The poem ends on the image of "black phones on hooks / Glittering / Glittering and disgusting / Voiceless..." which is both phallic yet oddly suggestive of infertility. As the Nazis sterilised their victims, the birthplace of fascism, Munich, in its glory became deadly and lifeless.

"Lady Lazarus," a famous poem from Ariel, is about suicide. One of the main themes is the speaker's view of her body as an object which she describes part by part. I am, she says, "A sort of walking miracle, my skin / Bright as Nazi lampshade, / My tight foot / A paperweight, / My face featureless, fine / Jew linen." Toward the end of the poem, the speaker describes herself in similar terms while addressing a sinister force:

> ...Herr Doktor.
> So, Herr Enemy.
> I am your opus,
> I am your valuable,
> The pure golden baby
> Ash, ash--
> * * *
> ...there is nothing there
> --A cake of soap,
> A wedding ring,
> A gold filling.

Thus the speaker defines herself in the frightening images of what the Nazis took from the dead. Twentieth-century historical atrocities become emblems for death. The speaker's bizarre confrontation with death is conveyed

through the gross reduction of herself to a series of objects, juxtaposed with the incomprehensibly huge number of people murdered which enabled the Nazis to turn their bodies into commodities.

"Lady Lazarus," like some of Plath's other poems, is addressed to an evil force. There is a shift in the speaker's attitude toward this figure first as God and then as the Devil: "Herr God, Herr Lucifer /...Beware /... / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air." The obtrusive rhyme calls attention to the lines and emphasises the extent of the speaker's madness. The surprise ending is in keeping with the contradictions in the poem. While living, the speaker is dying; she is pure baby turned to death object; God and Lucifer are one. The poem embodies a series of opposites so that the poet does not allow the speaker or the reader to pause or draw a single conclusion. Both are driven forward without rest, impelled by contradiction, mildly tormented like the souls in Dante's Limbo. While the poet couches the speaker's predicament in terms of the images of the Holocaust, the search for a reasonable explanation for the Nazi-Jew relationship leads one into a similar quandary. Although the poem is ostensibly about the speaker's suicidal impulses, it focuses on the fact that she is driven by a mad force, like the one behind the Nazi machine and their victims. Metaphor in "Lady Lazarus" thereby operates thematically on a number of levels. For this reason "Lady Lazarus" is a remarkable poem, and represents Plath's poetic sophistication and achievement. Throughout her poetry, her focus on the Holocaust is on the signs of death: the human remains, the crematory smoke and the infernal trains, the ultimate cause in the procedure for the inmates' destruction. Plath's poems, drawing from this imagery, change in the course of her work. These images become increasingly internalised so that they are eventually integrated with the persona's consciousness; this presents a danger, as warned by Adorno, Alvarez and Steiner, which may in part account for Plath's suicide. However, this could also be a driving force for her art (Aberbach pp160-161; Rosenfeld 1980, p181).

In early poems such as "The Thin People," Plath's main subject is the survivors, and consciously responds to them. In Ariel, which includes poems written in a desperate rush late at night a few months before she died, the poet creates a persona and dramatises the relationship between herself and her father, her relationship to death, and finally the madness in the Nazi-Jew relationship.

The poetry of Sylvia Plath provides not only a worthy illustration of some of the poetic trends in post-Holocaust poetry, but also provokes an impassioned debate on the moral issues already mentioned which such poetry introduces. Unlike most poets in this study, who touch upon these dilemmas, Plath seems to push them to their extremes, both consciously and unconsciously. Of the many poetic references to the Holocaust by non-victims, those in Plath's last book of poems, Ariel, remain among those most bitterly contested (Young, 1987). Of the poems in this book, "Daddy" in particular is the most widely discussed and challenged. Not only is there controversy over its success, failure or acceptability, but also over its meaning.

"Daddy" and "Little Fugue" are about Plath's relationship to her father, and images of the Holocaust dominate both poems. "Daddy" in particular reveals a love-hate relationship. The speaker calls herself a Jew and her father a Nazi. The speaker's voice is probably very close to the poet's since there is a biographical basis for the poem; her father, who died when she was a child, was a German-American, and her mother partly Jewish. The love-hate relationship between daughter and father defines the role of each. This is analogous to the relationship between the Nazi and Jew where the oppressor's role is defined by his victim and vice versa. The dynamics of these relationships are also parallel to those between the vampire and his prey, which constitutes another image in "Daddy" and concludes the poem. The relationship between the speaker and her father, resembling a deadly marriage, is horrible and almost mythical. Because of its importance among critical studies of Holocaust poetry by non-victims, "Daddy" will be quoted in its entirety:

Daddy

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time--
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one grey toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue is stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene.

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew,
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Tarot pack and my Tarot pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of *you,* With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You--

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw,
And I said I do, I do,
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two--
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

Some critics have argued that the speaker changes places with her father, she becoming a Nazi and he a Jew. This interpretation seems to be undercut by the ambiguity of the last word of the poem-- "Through." She is through with the poem, yet more importantly, she is through living because the vampire has been destroyed; their relationship was symbiotic in a sick way. He tortured her, and she adored it. The madness of their relationship, the subject of the poem, offers a parody of the Nazi-Jewish one. The malady is suggested both through Plath's choice of images and in the driving overture of end-line rhymes which are inconsistent from stanza to stanza. The "oo" sound dominates the poem. The lines of the first stanza end in "do," "shot," "foot," "white," and "Choo." "Jew" ends three out of six lines in a middle stanza, and in practically every stanza "you" is an end word at least twice: both words are stressed by similar sounding words throughout the poem. This extreme degree of repetition determines the poem's tone so that the speaker, in addition to the relationship she describes, sounds demented. Plath thereby suggests again that this particular father-daughter relationship and the Nazi-Jew relationship are alike in their sickness.

In "Daddy" Plath treats some of the perverted qualities of the Nazi mind as the meticulous care taken in the destruction and elimination of human bodies and the use of human bodies as resources. Extracting the gold fillings from the dead, making soap from human fat, and finally the bizarre storage of the shoes and hair of the dead are physical signs of the Nazi madness. "Daddy" opens with the image of a black shoe which apparently stands for the speaker's father. Addressing it, she begins "You do not do, you do not do / Any more black shoe." The shoe is also clearly a symbol of the speaker's confinement. She will surrender that shoe with which she has "lived in like a foot" at the end of the poem when she is "through." Here lies one of the major ironies of the poem. Being free of restriction and of the shoe suggests her death. The speaker like the Jew in the camp is trapped; her release is in suicide.

This poem has sparked a tidal wave of criticism and protest. In the first place, critics vehemently objected to Plath (or any poet) using the Holocaust as a vehicle for expressing her own, personal suffering: an American non-Jewish woman using the Jewish plight as a metaphor to convey her own. Marjorie Perloff condemns Plath's reference to the Holocaust as "empty," "histrionic," "cheap shots," "topical trappings" and "devices" (Perloff, p15). Irving Howe finds the implied comparison "utterly disproportionate," and that Plath "tries to enlarge upon the personal plight." Howe goes on to argue that "there is something monstrous, utterly disproportionate, when tangled emotions about one's father are deliberately compared with the historical fate of the European Jews" (Howe, pp232 & 235). What galls Howe is not the will to make meaning out of her pain, but that her use of Holocaust, in his view, is so calculated and self-serving.

Rosenfeld also finds Sylvia Plath's poetry on the Holocaust, in such texts as "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," objectionable, mainly because she makes only private use of the suffering. He attacks what he terms the "imaginative misappropriation of atrocity" in her poems. He argues that the result is bad art and claims, for example, that "Daddy" is "her boldest effort to manipulate the language of the Holocaust for private ends and, for that reason, her most problematic and distorted poem" (Rosenfeld 1980, pp181,179). He argues that images of the Holocaust should not be used to convey something about another subject. In this criticism of Plath he assumes that she is the subject of the poems and the Holocaust is the metaphor. He claims that this weakens her poetry because the images outweigh their subject; he dismisses the possibility that in Plath's poetry the theme and the metaphor merge, that in her poetry her immediate personal suffering and the suffering outside herself across all time become one. In fact, Rosenfeld attacks Plath on both moral and aesthetic grounds, asking in regard to her juxtaposition of self and Holocaust victim whether there is "a sufficient similarity to draw them into valid analogy," pointing out the impropriety of her borrowing from what critics consider to be the emotional "reserves of the Holocaust" (Rosenfeld 1980, p177-179).

On the other hand, Leon Wieseltier gives a more reasoned and even-handed explanation of why "Daddy," in particular, marks an inappropriate presumption:

> Auschwitz bequeathed to all subsequent art perhaps the most arresting of all possible metaphors for extremity, but its availability has been abused. For many it was Sylvia Plath who broke the ice...In perhaps her most famous poem, "Daddy," she was explicit...There can be no disputing the genuineness of the pain here. But the Jews with whom she identifies were victims of something worse than "weird luck." Whatever her father did to her, it could not have been what the Germans did to the Jews. The metaphor is inappropriate:...my own feeling is that Sylvia Plath did not earn it, that she did not respect the real incommensurability to her own experience of what took place (p20).

The critiques of Plath's poem touch on the question of the rightful and credible claims which can be made upon the memory and the images of the Holocaust. On the one hand, Plath's use of those symbols is a testimony to the widespread diffusion of the Holocaust images, their common currency, so to speak, in western culture. On the other hand, it represents a kind of devaluation of the particularity as well as the monstrosity of the historical experience (Friedman, pp534 & 549).

Irving Howe makes a strong moral and literary judgement about Plath's use of these images and raises some provocative questions relating to some of the previously mentioned trends in of the Holocaust literature of the 1960s in America:

> That dreadful events in the individual's psyche may approximate the sufferings of a people is indeed possible, but again it might be good to remember that Jews in the camps didn't merely "suffer": they were gassed and burned. Anyone-- poet, novelist, commentator-- who uses images of the camps in order to evoke personal traumas ought to have a very precise sense of the enormity of what he or she is suggesting. He or she ought to have enough moral awareness and literary control to ask whether the object and the image have any congruence...
>
> Is it possible that the condition of the Jews in the camps can be duplicated? Yes....But it is decidedly unlikely that it was duplicated in a middle-class family living in Wellesley, Massachusetts, even if it has a very bad daddy indeed....

> To condone such a confusion is to delude ourselves as to the nature of our personal miseries and their relationship to-- or relative magnitude when placed against-- the most dreadful event in the history of mankind (Howe, p237).

In all these criticisms, the key issue appears to be whether the use of the Holocaust as a metaphor is permissible, either ethically or aesthetically. Either Plath trivialises the Holocaust through what is arguably an essentially personal reference, or she aggrandises her experience by stealing the historical event. Butscher, for instance, argues that "There is no way that the poetry of an American girl writing from the remote perspective of the 1950s could ever capture the actual, brutal reality of the Holocaust" (p327). However, to some extent, this would also be true of any young American-born poet, including Reznikoff, Heyen, Feldman, or even Randall Jarrell, who have responded to the Holocaust most eloquently in their poetry. Unlike Rosenfeld, who is categorically opposed to metaphorical uses of the Holocaust, Irving Howe recognises that Plath's contravention was more a matter of degree than principle. He therefore echoes such critics as Alvarez, Steiner and Ezrahi in their contention that Holocaust literature is subject to high expectations, and limited to associations with some unspecified definition of appropriately significant issues and content.

Whether an individual's personal suffering justifies comparison to an atrocity on the level of the Holocaust has been sharply contested. Ironically, though, this may have been overlooked if it were not for the presumption of Plath calling herself a Jew: "I begin to talk like a Jew. / I think I may well be a Jew. /... / I may be a bit of a Jew." In writing this, Plath not only capitalises on the Jewish plight through a self-aggrandising identification with Jewish victims, but she almost flaunts it, raising yet further questions regarding appropriate authority in addressing the Holocaust. In writing "I may be a bit of a Jew," Plath sounds very much like Paul Celan's statement, quoting the Russian poet Marina Zwetajewa, that "All poets are Jews" (Shapiro 1958, px), or Nelly Sachs' contention that "All human beings who suffered became Jews" (in Bosmajian, p197). Indeed, even in The Bell Jar, Plath's main character

takes the name of Esther, the Jewish queen who kept her Jewishness a secret. With the increasing use of the Holocaust by Jews and non-Jews alike, and with the impact the Holocaust has had upon the entire modern psyche and literature, this claim has found sympathy with some critics. Indeed, although Wiesel takes issue with this statement, Steiner praises "Daddy" as the "Guernica of modern poetry," and, contradicting his earlier view, wonders if "perhaps it is only those who had no part in the events who *can* focus on them rationally and imaginatively" (Steiner 1967, p189).

Steiner, however, is in the minority among critics of Holocaust literature in his praise for "Daddy," which he describes as "one of the few poems I know of in any language to come near the last horror" of the Holocaust (Steiner 1967, p301). Like Alvarez, he was able to read into Plath's poetry far more than one woman's neurosis, and therefore deems her concentration camp imagery and comparisons fitting.

It is important to note that, unlike most poets considered in this study, Plath is not writing Holocaust poetry per se. Unlike Anne Sexton, who explicitly represented the impact of Auschwitz & Eichmann on herself, or Adrienne Rich, who represented parallels between the Nazi-Jew and male-female relationship of oppression, or W.D. Snodgrass, who explored the Nazi psychology, Sylvia Plath represented herself-- her inner life-- by analogy with the Holocaust Jew. Unlike most poets, Plath has not attempted to capture, or at least respond to, aspects of the Holocaust. Plath has not tried to re-imagine, to capture, or to represent these events in any way. The Holocaust exists for her not as an experience to be retold or described, but as an event available to her only as an idea, in whose image she has expressed another brutal reality, that of her own internal pain. As James Young explains,

> Whether or not non-victims like Heyen, Reznikoff and Feldman are classifiable as Holocaust poets may be debatable. Sylvia Plath's case is more straightforward: she is not a Holocaust poet, simply because she does not write about the Holocaust. Unlike poets like Celan, Rich, and Levertov, who figured the Holocaust in the shapes of unrelated events, Plath has now figured her own outwardly unrelated life in the image of the Holocaust itself (p127).

In writing "Little Fugue," a poem also addressed to her father, Plath draws unmistakable allusions to what is possibly the most famous and acclaimed Holocaust poem yet written in any language, Paul Celan's "Todesfuge" [Fuge of Death] (Friedman, p554). A brief comparison between the two, therefore, is informative.

In "Little Fugue," the speaker refers to her father as "A yew hedge of orders" (a choice of image in which both "you" and "Jew" resound), and describes herself and him as though they were both a series of unconnected parts. For example, she says of herself "These are my fingers," and of him, "You had one leg, and a Prussian mind." Subliminally, the implication is that her father is a Nazi.

Although there are no direct references to the camps, they are suggested by the clouds and the black yew tree which are the controlling images of the poem. Both are associated with her father and often appear in the same context. The poem opens, "The Yew's black fingers wag; / Cold clouds go over," and their father's blindness is then compared to the "featurelessness of that cloud." Music is also associated with her father and the image of that yew tree and cloud. "He could hear Beethoven; / Black yew, white cloud" opens one of the early stanzas suggesting that her father, like some of the Nazi leaders, appreciated the perfection and drama in music. The conclusion of the poem focuses on the speaker: she survived while "Death opened, like a black tree, blackly," and "The clouds are a marriage dress, of that pallor." The speaker's emotional obsession with her father is no less evident here than it is in "Daddy" because its images are also associated with her father and death.

These images, central to "Little Fugue," have similar associations in "Todesfuge" by Paul Celan, a camp survivor who committed suicide in 1970. In his poem, written in 1944-45, sunrise in the camps is described as the "Black milk of daybreak." The focus then shifts to the Nazi commander, who "whistles his Jews out" of the barracks to perform the camp orchestra (cf Felstiner's translation of Celan's "Deathfugue" below). The commander shouts to the musicians: "stroke darker the strings as smoke you shall climb

to the sky / Then you'll have a grave in the clouds..." As in Plath's poem, blackness, clouds and music are associated with the Nazi death-force.

The ostensible similarity between a poem written by an American living in London in the mid-1960s and one by a camp survivor is thought-provoking. The images created by the American poet's imagination and those by the memory of a camp victim overlap strikingly. It is possible that Plath had read Celan's poem because it first appeared in English in Michael Hamburger and Christopher Middleton's Modern German Poetry, 1919-1960: An Anthology With Verse Translation in 1962 (Felstiner). Even if Plath had read "Todesfuge" it is not likely that she consciously tried to imitate it; more likely these images and associations in Celan's poem struck a sympathetic note in Plath.

However, a comparison between the two poets is interesting even beyond the similarities in imagery. Celan's poem, "Todesfuge", has been hailed as the most innovative and important poem after Auschwitz, and that which made him the most important and influential poet in the German language since the war (Forché, p380; Friedman, p554). Like Plath's "Daddy," "Todesfuge" has an almost incongruent lyrical beauty to it which has sparked a fair deal of controversy; unlike Plath's "Daddy," "Todesfuge" is a poem on the Holocaust, capturing the essence of its terror perhaps better than any other. The poem is quoted as translated from the German by Paul Felstiner in 1986:

Deathfugue

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night we drink and we drink
we shovel a grave in the air there you won't feel too cramped
A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes
he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair Marguerite
he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are all sparkling he whistles his hounds to come close
he whistles his Jews into rows has them shovel a grave in the ground
he orders us strike up and play for the dance.

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at morning and midday we drink you at evening
we drink and we drink
A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes

he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair Marguerite
your ashen hair Shulamith we shovel a grave in the air there you won't feel too cramped
He shouts jab the earth deeper you there you others sing up and play
he grabs for the rod in his belt he swings it his eyes are blue
jab your spades deeper you there you others play on for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at midday and morning we drink you at evening
we drink and we drink
a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Marguerite
you aschenes Haar Shulamith he plays with his vipers
He shouts play death more sweetly Death is a master from Deutschland
he shouts scrape your strings darker you'll rise then in smoke to the sky
you'll have a grave then in the clouds there you won't feel to cramped

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at midday Death is a master aus Deutschland
we drink you at evening and morning we drink and we drink
Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland his eye is blue
he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true
a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margarete
he looses his hounds on us grants us a grave in the air
he plays with his vipers and daydreams der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland

dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Sulamith

From even a cursory reading of the poem, the powerful and provocative nature of Celan's 'statement' on the Holocaust is evident. Where the literal meaning of words are surpassed, Celan aptly captures the horror, mortality and perversion of concentration camps in the metaphor of "black milk." Music, a common theme in Holocaust poetry, is pervasive in the poem as are the German Masters of an art and culture which failed to prevent the inhumanity and irrationality of Auschwitz from taking place. Celan amplifies on this by encasing his powerful imagery in the structure of the Fugue, a form developed by one of the greatest German Masters, JS Bach. However, like the Holocaust itself, this poem is a fugue gone wrong, leading inevitably to a tragic conclusion, what John Felstiner describes as the "caustic irony" of the near-rhyme with Margarete-- the final coda [illegible] ending the long fugue in a note of discord; two voices with no reconciliation. Langer praises the poem as one of the few in the genre with an execution worthy of its content:

> The unusual pattern of "Fugue of Death," with its repudiation of normal punctuation and grammar, its fragmentary phraseology, its insistent return to a few dark metaphors and sombre themes which submerge and resurface in differing contexts with an incantatory persistence, finally absorbs the reader in a nightmare of syntactical illogic which incites disbelief even as it overwhelms (Langer 1975, p10).

Though generally lauded, this poem is not without its critics. When T.W. Adorno made his famous edict that "After Auschwitz, writing poetry is an abomination" he was referring specifically to this poem, and its too-masterful lyricism and beauty (Adorno p125). Steiner, too, found the Holocaust incompatible with such beauty, particularly when written in German, the language Celan continued to use even when living in France: "The use of the German language to dehumanise man for 12 years had pushed it beyond the breaking point and finally exhausted its resilience and usefulness for art" (Steiner 1967, p108). Finally, others have faulted Celan for intermingling an almost erotic longing in this landscape of death.

While a full analysis of this extremely intricate poem is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to note how strongly "Deathfuge" contrasts with "Daddy." Plath is an extremely accomplished poet, perhaps the best known modern poet in America. Ariel is acclaimed as containing her best poetry, with "Daddy" often singled out as most worthy of note (Rose). Indeed, all Holocaust considerations aside, it is a powerful poem; by Sontag's aesthetic criteria or any other, it may be considered highly successful. In my opinion Rosenfeld, Wieseltier and Perloff take a rather extreme position in rejecting Plath's poetry; by their argument most of the poetry written by non-victims would be rejected, and confessional poets would be targets of particular scorn. Whether Plath's suffering gives meaning to the trauma of a whole generation, as Steiner believes, or remains self-indulgently personal, as does Howe, is subject to debate, and would decide whether Plath's poetry lives up to the "high expectations" articulated by Ezrahi and Alvarez. However, in considering Plath I find it more informative to take the approach of Young, that Sylvia Plath does not

write Holocaust Poetry-- certainly not in the sense as does Celan-- and of Rosenfeld, who holds informing the reader about the Holocaust to be the primary purpose of Holocaust literature; if anything, Plath does exactly the opposite: for Celan, the Holocaust is a reality which can only be expressed through metaphor; for Plath, the Holocaust is a metaphor to be freely used to express the only thing that is real to her, a private and personal pain.

To the extent that she subordinates the Holocaust to the personal, Plath stands alone. However, the challenges she poses and questions she raises regarding what, if any, imaginative response can be made to the Holocaust is common, in other guises, to all the poets considered in this study; Plath simply presents the most extreme case, all the more so because her poetry is so impressive. Two quotes, by way of conclusion, help to place Plath within the greater body of Holocaust literature:

> These poems take tremendous risks....But minor poets even of a great intensity-- and that is what she was-- tend to prove bad models. Sylvia Plath's tricks of voice can be imitated. Not her desperate integrity [in successfully linking the Jewish tragedy with her own] (Steiner 1967, p189).

> Plath's poems tend to embody the extremity of this reciprocal exchange between the private and historical realms in ways that would seem not to make her guilty of 'exploiting atrocity' so much as drawing on a public pool of language that is necessarily informed by atrocity (Young 1987, p132).

13. Anne Sexton

Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath are often discussed together; their poetry has much in common, and in many respects they were spiritual sisters, both crying out through their poetry to a world full of misery, and ultimately ending their lives in suicide. Although both poets respond to the Holocaust in their poetry, the impact of the Holocaust upon Sexton and her use of it is both less questionable and less consistent than in the case of Plath.

In discussing the work of many poets it is a gross oversimplification to identify the speaker with the poet because often the presence of both

together is a source of irony and is thereby thematically important. In Sexton's poems, however, it is difficult to differentiate between the speaker and the poet. Granted, the poet frequently undercuts and mocks the speaker, but this seems to be in keeping with Sexton's view of herself. The fictive self is a straightforward representation of the poet's view of herself. Many critics tacitly agree on this and rarely use the term "speaker" in discussions of her poetry. In this regard and others, Sexton's poetry is characteristically confessional, a style which, as discussed previously, has much in agreement with common trends in post-Holocaust poetry; it lends itself well to including Holocaust imagery, trying to make sense of a post-Holocaust world and challenging ideas of acceptable subject-matter for poetry. Sexton was no exception, and her poems such as "Menstruation at Forty" provoked Robert Lowell to declare her poems "meagre and exaggerated. Many of her most embarrassing poems would have been fascinating if someone had put them into quotes, as the presentation of some character, not the author" (in Kumin 1981, pxx).

However, it is precisely this inability to distance herself from the voices in her poems or the cries in the world which drove Sexton to write poetry, and ultimately to commit suicide. Sexton was deeply influenced by the Holocaust, and many of her poems can be seen as her attempt to make sense of the world and her life, knowing that atrocities like the Holocaust and men like Eichmann are possible. Although Sexton is not always consistent in her use of the Holocaust, her poems are markedly different from Plath's, in that she investigates the impact of the real Eichmann and the real Holocaust upon herself, and in doing so her use of the Holocaust, while still personal, is not entirely transformed through metaphor to a private representation: the Holocaust for Sexton is more than just an idea.

Of Sexton, Maxine Kumin has written "Someone [Nietzsche] once said that we have art in order not to die of the truth, a dictum we might neatly apply to Sexton's perspectives" (1981, pxxi). Indeed, the poetry of Sexton illustrates the extent to which the atrocities of the Holocaust can impact upon the literary mind, causing a psychic damage which Sexton was

unable to endure. Sexton is filled with self-contempt and guilt that stems from her notion that she is evil, dirty and flawed. The animal with which the speaker in Sexton's poems most often associates herself is a rat. In poem after poem, the speaker says she has a rat inside of her. This rat is an apt if rather ugly symbol of the marriage of life and death-- a disease-carrying creature associated with decay and especially frightening because of its boldness and speed. This evil seems to be at the source of the poet's art. In a number of poems, she contemptuously calls herself Ms. Dog, and the evil force within her she terms "Eichmann."

Unlike Plath, therefore, she compares herself to a Nazi; in only one poem does she associate her condition with that of the Jews. In Live or Die, her third volume of poetry published in 1967, appears "Black Lady," a poem ambiguously addressed either to death or her mother. The speaker says, "I will call like the Jew at the gate, / I will deal the wound over and over / and you will not yield."

In evaluating Sexton's poetry, several feminist critics have helped elucidate her major themes. Suzanne Juhasz, who like many feminist critics does not make any distinction between Sexton and her speakers, contends in "Seeking the Exit or the Home: Poetry and Salvation in the Career of Anne Sexton" that Sexton is searching for salvation. It requires ridding herself of the extremely negative feelings she has of herself, which are symbolised in the image of the rat; but this would also damage the source of her art. Juhasz points out that "sanity might bring peace of mind to the woman, but it would destroy the poetry" (Gilbert & Gubar, p267). She adds that Sexton was tormented by the difference between the way she perceived the world and the way she felt she was supposed to see it. The madwoman, the rat, and Eichmann are the sources of her poetry.

In his article "Anne Sexton and God", William J. McGill suggests that Sexton's self-concept is caused not only by her response to her mother but also by her futile search for God. Sexton believes that her failure in "rowing toward God" may be attributed to an evil, her godlessness, and she personifies the quality, calling it "Eichmann." This embodiment of evil within

the label "Eichmann" is suggestive of the impact his 1962 trial had in awakening the American literary imagination to the Holocaust, and Sexton's inability to escape from a personal association with Eichmann accords with the view that the Holocaust is more far-reaching than a strictly Jewish tragedy.

In "Live," another poem from Live or Die, she says in reaction to her decision not to drown some Dalmatian puppies:

> I promise to live more if they come, because in spite of cruelty
> and the stuffed railroad cars for ovens,
> I am not what I expected. not an Eichmann.
> The poison just didn't take.
> . . .
> I say Live, Live because of the sun,
> the dream, the excitable gift.

The poem is about the narrator's view of herself as an agent of death; the occasion for the poem is that this day is different from others for her. She says "Today life opened inside me like an egg /.... / There was the sun, / her yolk moving feverishly," and continues that she knew the sun was a purifier but "hadn't known she [the sun] was an answer." In a later section of the poem, she contrasts that realisation with "Here, / all along, thinking I was a killer, anointing myself daily / with my little poisons..." The extremes are respectively the sun and Eichmann. The image of Eichmann suggests an unconscious association of the exterior hateful world with the interior one. The narrator not only compares herself (by negation) to Eichmann, but she also defines herself in terms of the cruelty of the camps. She is saying, in effect, that despite the world's cruelty, she is, surprisingly, not as cruel.

It is possible to argue that Sexton's main concern is herself and not what is on the outside; however, her defining herself in those terms suggests that part of her self-hatred is bolstered by her observations of the inhumanity of which mankind is capable.

The Eichmann figure appears again in "The Wonderful Musician" in Transformations, her fifth volume, which is made up of familiar fairy tales that she recalls in startling ways so that psychological and sexual themes emerge in

them. Beverly Tanenhaus, in "Poetics of Survival and Poetry: The Poetry of Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich", claims that in these tales Sexton presents a magic solution for the victimised figure; however, since she emphasises the viciousness in the evil figures, one might argue that the results are inconsequential when compared to the cruel forces that motivate the tales. "The Wonderful Musician," unlike many of the other poems, does not draw on any single well-known fairy tale, but on the myth of the violinist who is so adept that it is believed he received his skill from the devil. In the poem the image of the violin player is associated with the sex drive, the mother figure, and Eichmann. To open the tale, the narrator compares the fiddler to "dances...lighting a fire in the belly" and "the dance of death" with resonances again with Celan's "Todesfuge." The musician tricks and torments a wolf, fox, and hare and is finally saved by a man. The creatures free themselves and return for revenge, but the fiddler is saved by a woodcutter. As the poem ends, he was "Saved by his gift / like many of us-- / little Eichmanns, / little mothers-- / I'd say." Sexton takes the myth of the devilishly skilful violin player and adds the frightening idea of a skill used not simply for its own sake but for hurting others. Since the use of the highest skills for evil purposes was at the core of the Nazi regime and mentality, the reference to Eichmann conveys a great deal in a few words. In this respect, for Sexton, aspects of the Holocaust take on almost iconic values, so absorbed into her consciousness that words such as "Eichmann" or "ovens" may immediately convey extremes beyond direct description.

In assessing such usage of the Holocaust, one might charge that Sexton trivialises the evil of the Nazis (and thus lessening the impact of their crimes) by facile comparisons between Eichmann, architect for the death of millions, and herself. This would be quite a similar criticism to that launched against Plath from the opposite side of the spectrum. However, because Sexton's examination of and identification with the evil in Eichmann is quite different from Plath's representation of herself in the figure of the Holocaust Jew, she avoids some of the charges of presumption common with respect to imaginative uses of the Holocaust by non-victims, and in fact few writers have been critical of the references to the Holocaust in Sexton's poetry. Perhaps identification with and

metaphors of the Nazis is less of a "sacred" realm for literature, or that the Nazi image has been sufficiently assimilated into our consciousness to be employed without too many dilemmas, as suggested by James Young and evidenced by the popular American television comedy series involving Nazis (but not Jews), "Hogan's Heroes."

However, Sexton was an unstable woman, and her poetry was not able to maintain this careful and acceptable balance between the personal and historical in her poetry. In "for Mr. Death who Stands with his Door Wide Open," from The Death Notebook, Sexton is guilty of excesses and extremes in Holocaust usage which is more characteristic of Plath:

> For Mr. Death Who Stands With His Door Open
>
> Time grows dim. Time that was so long
> grows short, time, all goggle-eyed,
> wiggling her skirts, singer her torch song,
> giving the boys a buzz and a ride,
> that Nazi Mama with her beer and sauerkraut.
> Time, old gal of mine, will soon dim out.
>
> May I say how young she was back then,
> playing piggley-witch and hoola-hoop,
> dancing the jango with six awful men,
> letting the chickens out of the coop,
> promising to marry Jack and Jerome,
> and never bothering, never, never,
> to come back home.
>
> Time was when time had time enough
> and the sea washed me daily in its delicate brine.
> There is no terror when you swim in the buff
> or speed up the boat and hang out a line.
> Time was when I could hiccup and hold my breath
> and not in that instant meet Mr. Death.
>
> Mr. Death, you actor, you have many masks.
> Once you were sleek, a kind of Valentino
> with my father's bathtub gin in your flask.
> With my cinched-in waist and my dumb vertigo
> at the crook of your long white arm
> and yet you never bent me back, never, never
> into your blackguard charm.

Next, Mr. Death, you held out the bait
during my first decline, as they say,
telling that suicide baby to celebrate
her own going in there own puppet play.
I went out popping pills and crying adieu
in my own death camp with my own little Jew.

Now your beer belly hangs out like Fatso.
You are popping your buttons and expelling gas.
How can I lie down with you, my comical beau
when you are so middle-aged and lower-class.
Yet you'll press me down in your envelope;
pressed as neat as a butterfly, forever, forever,
beside Mussolini and the Pope.

Mr Death, when you came back to the ovens it was short
and to the drowning man you were likewise kind,
and the nicest of all to the baby I had to abort
and middling you were to all the crucified combined.
But when it comes to my death let it be slow,
let it be pantomime, this last peep show,
so that I may squat at the edge trying on
black necessary trousseau.

The familiar image of the Nazi female commandant, an archetypal horror figure, is here likened to a cabaret entertainer. The narrator suggests that the entertainer is fading and that her own time is running out; this grotesque comparison illustrates the narrator's self-mockery.

"For Mr. Death..." echoes Eliot's "Prufrock" (another poem which is about mortality and which mocks the speaker) in its repetition of "time," particularly in the first stanza. Later, as in Emily Dickenson's "Because I could not Stop for Death," death is presented as a suitor. With Sexton, however, he is a sly one, addressed as an "actor," or "a kind of Valentino." Apparently as a result of the attraction of Death she became suicidal and began "popping pills and crying adieu / in my own death camp with my own little Jew." The tormented deathbound camp Jew symbolises Sexton's tendency toward suicide. Finally, the Holocaust imagery emerges for a third time at the end of the poem with reference to the ovens, and death.

As mentioned already, Sexton's Holocaust imagery is not systematic or consistent; the references to it do not add up to a conceit in which an elaborate, closely associated net of images parallel and suggest something else. Instead, the colloquial term "Nazi Mama" is used to symbolise time, and the informal term "little Jew" suggests the narrator's view of suicide, and finally "death in the ovens" stands for a short death, which the narrator does not want. The mixture of imagery does, however, contribute to the poem's tone. Sexton mocks both death and herself. Death's subjects, the "Nazi Mama" (time and death giver), and the "little Jew" (death's receiver) and the "oven" (death's machine) are lumped together as props on a cabaret stage on which the narrator treats death half contemptuously, half respectfully.

In "For Mr. Death..." there is not much balance between Sexton's personal and historical statement. A historical reality is used to establish the narrator's sarcastic yet self-effacing tone. It is this kind of treatment of the Holocaust that, as with Plath's poetry, evokes such harsh criticism from Rosenfeld and Ezrahi. They would view the poem as a self-indulgent use of an event that was a source of pain and death for millions.

However, in Sexton's final volume, The Awful Rowing Toward God, a balance is re-established between personal revelation and historical commentary. Here many poems explore themes beyond the personal experience of the speaker, such as the relationship between God and man and the reason that man is evil; here, Sexton's poetry goes beyond the confessional, and addresses questions provoked by the Holocaust, questions of an order of significance and importance of which Langer and Steiner might approve.

In "After Auschwitz" the narrator steps back; the focus is on man's condition and his wickedness. Like a religious meditation the poem opens with a physical description, but there the subject is anger and evil; "anger" is "as black as a hook" and evil is a Nazi each day sautéing a baby "in his frying pan." The poem then considers man and evil:

> ...death looks on with a casual eye
> and picks at the dirt under his fingernail. Man is evil
> ...

Man is a flower
that should be burnt
...
Man
is a bird full of mud
...
And death looks on with a casual eye
and scratches his anus.

In the last part of "After Auschwitz" Sexton, like many religious poets, invokes God.

Instead of asking for God's aid like Donne or Hopkins, after calling man an outhouse, Sexton says "Let man never raise his teacup. / Let man never again write a book. / Let man never again put on his shoe" and the poem ends with the surprise "I beg the Lord not to hear." Not only is this a departure from a meditative poem, it is also acutely double-edged. To criticise man's evil, Sexton uses a vocabulary that has strong associations with the concentration camps. She says, apparently as a result of man's evil, that he should be burnt and that he "is not a temple / but an outhouse." The Nazis called the death camps *anus mundi*, so that Sexton's pronouncement is not unlike that of the Nazis. The main idea of the poem, thus, is that "After Auschwitz," after we see what evil man is capable of, the appropriate conclusion is that man is beyond hope and God's grace. Since the references to Auschwitz are not literal but surreal, Auschwitz loses its substantiality and becomes a symbol of terrible damage to humanity. The poem also implies that because of man's cruelty to man, he deserves Auschwitz. The title, however, seems to support the first reading. In either case, Auschwitz is theologically important; it is an emblem for man's evil, and its usage in Sexton's poetry is suggestive of the extent to which the Holocaust has altered pre-World War II humanist convictions.

Similar theological themes emerge in "Sickness Unto Death," another poem in The Awful Rowing Toward God. Here God and Hitler define good and evil and they are repeatedly presented in opposition. The speaker, lying ill, claims she is totally godless. But she continues that a priest counters that "God was even in Hitler." She adds that "if God were in Hitler

/ then God would be in me" implying that the speaker views herself as worse than Hitler. This hyperbole reveals succinctly her sickness. At the same time it reveals an obsession with Hitler and God, and the associations between them.

"It is Time," an odd mixture of external and internal worlds, also treats the speaker's alienation from God. Part of the poem is addressed to a priest and part of it is to herself. She complains of her evil, calling herself Ms. Dog, a perverse inversion of God but also praises God and "all useful objects." Her sick self-consciousness is paralleled by the troubled American self-consciousness during the Vietnam War. She asks "why am I in this country of black mud" and associates this war with the World War II period when, workers "painted out the gold" on the dome of the Boston Capitol. She continues, "What did they think the Nazis / would do with it, / make it into teeth? Peel it off and buy whores?" and she contrasts this situation on earth to that of heaven where "there will be as much love as there / are runners off the coast of Maine, / there will be gold that no one hides / from the Nazis..." As in "After Auschwitz" the imagery and vocabulary jar. To criticise the American response to the Germans during the Second World War, Sexton uses terms suggestive of the Nazi atrocities.

Beverly Tanenhaus stresses the point that Sexton is victimised by her own inability to assert her independence in a male-dominated world. She is not sufficiently liberated to be able to reject male-oriented social values. "Sexton's narrator," argues Tanenhaus, "emerges as victim, without power. She is dependent upon the mercy and competence of outside forces-- usually men or a powerful parent-- that are risky at best." Tanenhaus adds that "While Sexton looks to additional rescue figures Christ and psychiatrists" they "either offer repeat performances of parental brutality or are sadly inept" (Tanenhaus, pp106-107). While Sexton only applies these issues to the Holocaust in passing, this political usage of the Holocaust is taken up more pressingly by Levertov, Berg and, in particular, Adrienne Rich.

However, unlike her earlier poetry, in "It is Time" and other poems from The Awful Rowing Toward God, Sexton speaks so casually of Nazis and Eichmann that they become familiar elements and read almost like brand names. In fact, the term "the Nazis" becomes disassociated from the real Nazis and conjures up images of little menacing devils. Robert Phillips in The Confessional Poets condemns Sexton's "nursery-rhyme-like repetition" as nothing more than a gimmick (Phillips, p88). Other critics have quite justifiably objected to what they consider a cartoon-like presentation of the major subject in her last book, her quest for God. In Sexton's imagination the forces of good and evil have been dramatised so many times that she appears to be left with only a shell of the symbol, a process Postman has described and which, in relation to the Holocaust, other critics have sought to prevent.

Phillip's evaluation of Sexton's poetry is in accordance with Rosenfeld's claim that any such treatment of the Holocaust will not only serve to trivialise such a major event, but to create poor poetry, a mixing of ethics and aesthetics which does not always follow. However, in support of Rosenfeld's argument, in Sexton's poems the figures in the Holocaust are like props on a stage; there is little development, just the narrator's consciousness of the facts. Sexton's consciousness determines the images and there is little detail because Sexton's awareness of the facts is more important than the facts themselves. For these reasons, although Sexton did address some issues where references to the Holocaust might be justified, and her usage in general was far less extreme or provocative than Plath, Sexton was unable to entirely overcome the significant difficulties involved with using the Holocaust in poetry.

14. Maxine Kumin

Maxine Kumin is Jewish, and her approach to the Holocaust marks an uneasy balance between responses characteristic of confessional poets and characteristic of a group of American Jewish authors which has been named "the Second Generation." Like others in this latter group, Kumin

feels a mission to bear witness to an event and a culture she never really knew, and is partially drawn to the Holocaust by a feelings of guilt for having been spared the death camps so easily. However, like the confessional poets, Kumin does not avoid a mocking, personal or even trivial approach to an event representing the death of millions. Finally, Kumin shares Alvarez's hope in the restorative power of art, and seeks in her poetry to find some harmony or balance between the extremes presented by Holocaust and modern-day life.

Kumin's poetry has neither the problems nor the power of Sexton's. The poet and novelist, a close friend of Sexton for eighteen years, is not nearly as captivated by the awareness of evil. Her personal life has not been unhappy, and her response to the personal experience of evil is antithetical to that of Sexton. Where Sexton repeatedly portrays evil as a rat inside her, Kumin is restorative: evil and death are part of the life process. Images of the life-force are the lasting ones in Kumin's poetry.

Death, love, Jewishness and the relationship between mother and daughter are some of the main themes in Kumin's poetry. In addition, her reaction to the Holocaust appears in several poems and is of thematic importance in one of her novels. In a 1975 interview with Martha Meek, Kumin claimed that the poetic responses to the Holocaust constitute a main current in contemporary literature. She argued that students should read this literature so that "the history and the lessons are not lost" (Kumin, 1979, p56).

Kumin has published five books of poetry which have received a moderate amount of attention. The Retrieval System has been praised most highly. Her harshest critic is Michael True, who claims that she is "at best an urbane comfortable poet and, at worst, self-pitying" (Murphie, p860). Philip Booth and Sybil Estess, in reviews of The Retrieval System, independently conclude that Kumin is forceful in her unified vision of a world in flux that is stilled by the facts of birth and death. Booth finds her poems' "distinctive nature...derives from a world where constant (if partial) recovery of what's 'lost' is as sure as the procession of the equinoxes" (Booth, p18). It

is through the poet's image-making facility, echoes Estess, that Kumin impresses on her audience that "only our consciousness and imaginative lives enable our bodies to house our souls" (Estess, p108). Perhaps it is only by clinging to this conviction, along with the additional motivations common to the second generation, that Kumin was more easily able to survive writing poetry on the Holocaust, something which proved too much for Plath and Sexton.

Kumin addressed the Holocaust in several poems from The Retrieval System, and makes subtle references to it in a few poems from Up Country: Poems of New England New and Selected. However, it is in the earlier volume of poems, Nightmare Factory, that Kumin's attention is most sharply directed to the subject of the Holocaust. She includes two fairly long poems which are straightforward in addressing the Nazi destruction of the Jews; however, they are not at all straightforward in their meaning.

After a focus on the Holocaust early in her career, Kumin confronts the marriage of the forces of life and death in The Retrieval System. Although most critics agree that the later poems are superior, it may be argued that her early focus on the Holocaust and apparent acceptance of the consequences of the Third Reich contributed to some of the themes in The Retrieval System.

Two poems from The Nightmare Factory, "The Amsterdam Poem" and "The Paris Poem" juxtapose wartime Europe with the present to contrast the civilisations and cultures. In "The Amsterdam Poem" the speaker identifies herself as an American. She is attending an all-Beethoven concert conducted by a Japanese who "When the firebombs fell in Tokyo / was ten years old. Screaming." She continues to stress the gulf between the man's music and his war (Kumin 1970, p21).

Later in "The Amsterdam Poem" the focus is on Anne Frank's house and the attic where the German Jewish family hid their remarkable daughter. As a Jew, Kumin identifies with Anne Frank and says, "In '33 I was eight years old, / soon to begin the Nazi nightmares / a hundred cold / wakings upstairs / in a warm bed in Germanstown, / Pennsylvania." After picturing

Anne's arrest, the last part of the poem switches to the description of the same setting in the present. Outside one of the attic windows, a pigeon is struggling in a canal. Police arrive in a Volkswagen (the Nazi-designed car), and everyone cheers as a guide saves the bird. What is important to note about this poem is that there is a fair degree of factual and historical content to it, and the poem is clearly presenting the historical event of the Holocaust itself, rather than reducing the Holocaust to a metaphor for something entirely different and inappropriate. Here Kumin writes very differently to Plath or Sexton. The poem concludes with Kumin's apparent gratefulness that she was not in Amsterdam in 1941 since "KLM can fly us out." In considering the European Jews, Kumin may feel guilt in that they suffered and she did not.

In addition to forces of guilt and a desire to testify, Kumin also seeks to heal in some way the wound carved by the Holocaust atrocities into her perception of the world. For this reason "The Amsterdam Poem" changes its focus and expresses some sympathy for the Dutch, despite their complicity with the Nazis in the death of Anne Frank and the deportation of thousands of other Jews. Kumin writes "In 1941, there wasn't a pigeon here / and the Dutch had begun to eat rats." She continues "What can't I forgive? The rebirth of pigeons? / Of caring... /... / For suffering there is no quantum." In the interview with Meek, Kumin discusses this poem and the conflicts between her sympathetic portrayals of both Anne Frank and the Dutch. She concludes, very much a second-generation poet, that although she tries through her poetry, "What I was saying is that I seem to be the one who can't forgive." She concludes with a statement that is as noncommittal as the poem, "I don't know what constitutes suffering any more than I know what constitutes the healing process" (Kumin 1979, p54).

In "Woodchucks" from Up Country: Poems of New England New and Selected, Kumin is self-mocking. The poem is about her shooting woodchucks that have been destroying her garden. The poem opens "Gassing the woodchucks didn't turn out right" and ends "If only they'd [the woodchucks] all consented to be unseen / gassed underground the quiet

Nazi way." In a highly mocking tone she says midway through the poem "I, a lapsed pacifist fallen from grace / puffed with Darwinian pieties for killing, / now drew a bead on the littlest woodchuck's face."

It hardly seems possible that she means to compare the Jews to the pesky woodchucks, yet her diction and choice of images suggest just that. In "Woodchucks" Kumin no longer adopts the far less problematic motivations common to second-generation poets, and instead gives no special treatment to the Holocaust as an event of significance or even as an event of fact; like the other confessional poets Plath and Sexton, for Kumin in these poems the Holocaust is subject to what many critics feel is a trivialising usage in metaphor for private ends. Like Sexton, Kumin was not consistent in her approach to the Holocaust, and so the difficulties she faces vary in degree. Indeed, Kumin does not address the Holocaust at all in her later poetry, having decided to confront other issues and employ other metaphors entirely.

15. Adrienne Rich

Unlike Kumin and Sexton, Adrienne Rich confronts the Holocaust in a consistent and focused manner. She stands almost alone among American poets in her directed application of Holocaust imagery for premeditated ends. Her poetry is further distinguished from the confessional poets previously discussed by its highly political orientation; while Rich touches upon the position of art and music as a mainstay against atrocity, and briefly addresses the Vietnam war, she is primarily a feminist poet, and her poems relentlessly explore the balance of power between genders, a theme which Sexton touches upon only briefly in favour of the more personal outcries common to confessional poetry.

Because Rich meticulously uses Holocaust imagery for predetermined, significant and external aims, she avoids any charge of trivialising it. She might even be praised by Ezrahi, Langer or Steiner for undertaking the "special responsibility" associated with using the Holocaust to address issues of significance. However, this same directedness has

also been faulted by such critics as Rosenfeld, Wiesel and Baumgart, who feel that to apply the Holocaust to anything else is to usurp it, and Rich's intentionality and single-mindedness in this application would make it all the more an affront against the millions of Jews whose oppression and destruction were like nothing else that has taken place before or since.

Adrienne Rich's reputation was established much earlier than Kumin's or Sexton's, and before her radical feminist stance. Because she has had a major impact on contemporary poetry and poetics, other poets, especially women, are often compared to her. Contrasting Sexton with Rich, Tanenhaus claims that Sexton [like Kumin] is unable to see herself in political terms, whereas Rich can. Consequently, Rich launches a strong attack against what she considers to be intolerable in men's treatment of women and in each sex's image of itself; Sexton, on the other hand, argues Tanenhaus, turns these problems inward and treats herself as an object of contempt (Tanenhaus, p114).

Rich's orientation is essentially political so that as Tanenhaus observes, "political event moves beyond metaphor of personal expression"; and, perhaps more importantly, personal expression symbolises political event (Tanenhaus, p113). In this way, Rich is both a confessional and a feminist poet. For almost twenty years, Rich has been suggesting, first in her poetry and later also in essays, that the relationship between the sexes is a poor one. Men oppress women because they have failed to acknowledge the female aspect of their personality. It is not until a member of either sex embraces both the feminine and masculine sides of personality that such an individual can reach self-actualisation and also cease to oppress or be oppressed. The male failure to integrate both sides of personality is, according to Rich, the main cause of aggression on a number of levels: between the sexes, between races, and between nations. Rich considered the Holocaust at the beginning of her interest in feminism in the early 1960s; in the late 1960s her focus on both intensified. It is important to realize, however, that the Nazi annihilation of the Jews is seen within the context of the greater problem of the male-female relationship.

Prior to 1963 with the publication of Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law, which presents Rich's observations on women and their roles as defined by men and maintained by women, Rich's poetry, according to Alicia Ostriker, reflected the "ranking styles in post-war literary academe" (Ostriker, p8). Her first volume, A Change of World, was selected by Auden for the Yale Younger Poets Series in 1951, and he noted that there were echoes of Yeats, Frost, Stevens, Dickenson and himself in Rich's poems. In this volume, she accepts the modernist position on art when she says in "At the Bach Concert," "A too-compassionate art is only half art. / Only such proud restraining purity [as Bach has] / Restores the else-betrayed, too human heart." Clearly, Rich is celebrating art, and art at its generally accepted musical pinnacle: Bach.

In Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law, Rich departs from this modernist stance and moves toward her main concern, women's role in male-oriented Western society. This is accompanied by poems in Leaflets which employ dream imagery and are much less conventional in structure than earlier poems. With each succeeding volume the poems have become freer structurally and increasingly didactic in their feminism. In this didacticism Rich herself seems to be writing a variation of the form of art that she had earlier rejected-- a too compassionate art.

Images of the Holocaust appear particularly in the poems she wrote in the 1960s. It is likely, however, that the American involvement in the Vietnam War was the primary influence which led Rich to images of German brutality. A number of her poems written in 1968 and 1969 express the abhorrence of the American involvement in Vietnam that many intellectuals and artists felt at the time. Other poems also allude to the Holocaust. The Vietnam war probably contributed to her growing intolerance of evil and oppression and consequently to her acceptance of radical feminism.

In Leaflets, Rich includes in journal form a series of Ghazals (poems composed of five pairs of unrhymed unmetred couplets first written in a more structured form by the Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib in the nineteenth century). Dozens of these poems compose the long poem "Leaflets"

(Cooper). One dated 7 /23 /69 exemplifies Rich's fusion of sex and politics. She intimates that the male's failure to be affected by the female and his desire to have power over her is part of the same mentality that built the death camps. The poem also rejects her previously held notion that art is salvation, and upon this consideration a vivid image of the Holocaust is employed. The poem begins: "When your sperm enters me, it is altered; /... / If the mind of the teacher is not in love with the mind of the student / he is simply practising rape...." The poem ends, "Our words are jammed in an electric jungle; / sometimes, though, they rise and wheel croaking above the treetops / An open window; thick summer night; electric fences trilling. / What are you doing here at the edge of the death-camp, Vivaldi."

It is peculiar how many writers associate the Nazi death-factories with music. It suggests a common perception of irony in the Holocaust: it was a supreme effort in the perfection of a method for death that was as carefully structured as, say, the baroque sonata or one of Bach's Fugues. A second irony in Rich's final image is in the juxtaposition of music, an art in which freedom is attained through order, with the death-camp where the complete loss of freedom is caused by order. Finally, Rich suggests that the notion advanced by Alvarez, Kumin and others-- namely, that art is a stay against brutality-- is suspect.

Rich opens another poem from Leaflets, perhaps partly inspired by the daily television coverage of Vietnam casualties, with a graphic description of the Crusaders' pillage and continues by alluding to events in the death-camps:

> the gallows, the photographs
> of dead Jewish terrorists, aged 15
> their faces wide-eyed
> ...
> what are we coming to
> what wants these things of us
> who wants them.

Rich draws parallels between these crimes against humanity that occurred over five hundred years apart. The direct statement at the end of the section unembellished by metaphor suggests the artist's protest against atrocity is minute when compared to the terror of these deeds.

Several years later, however, in Diving Into the Wreck, Rich writes a powerful didactic poetry which reveals an underlying belief that art does have a role in combating wrong. In this volume and in later books such as The Dream of a Common Language Poems, Rich becomes increasingly outspoken and direct on the subject of man's oppression of women. According to a sympathetic critic, Alicia Ostriker, the volume has mythic significance. The controlling image is water, and she points out that Rich "invents an altered symbolism-- instead of male heroes who rise to mountain tops-- her hero dives into the sea." (Ostriker, p8).

"Walking in the Dark" celebrates a female (possibly Leni Reifenstahl) Nazi filmmaker's depiction of the women's diving event during the 1936 Olympics; it also celebrates the divers' grace. First the poem describes the film's sequence of divers in slow motion as they were "falling / into the pool / at the Berlin Olympics" and next, where the filmmaker reversed the film, the bodies were rising "arching back to the tower / time reeling backward." Finally, Rich contrasts the freedom and beauty of the divers' entrance into the water with the entrapment of the dark enclosure of the gas chamber:

> Clarity of open air
> before the dark chambers of the shower-heads
> the bodies falling again freely....
> A woman made the film
> against
> the law
> of gravity.

According to Tanenhaus, Rich is depicting women's victorious expression of power and beauty despite the Nazi oppressive regime. She points out that "Awareness of the horror of the concentration camp...does not twin the divers' form. On the contrary, they combine their political awareness, which is a form of power, with their exquisite body control more intensely and accurately to probe their experience, their dive into the water...." She continues, "The fact that the filmmaker was a woman who violated natural law to record her vision [by reversing the film] suggests that this film is a symbolic illustration of women's ability to alter patriarchal law,

to reverse their position in history" (Tanenhaus, pp116-117). Although Tanenhaus may be reading too much into the poem, since the Nazi regime oppressed both men and women, and many women supported the fascist policies, there is no question that the beauty of the divers and the film are contrasted with the Nazi atrocities. Rich's apparent oversight of the fact that both the athletes and films by German filmmakers were used by the Nazis to strengthen their image and promote the myth of Nordic superiority suggests the radicalism of her feminism.

In confronting such political topics through references to the Holocaust, Crusades and other myth-making events, Rich must display a careful awareness of the historical in her poetry. Like James Young, Rich finds that major historical events are inevitably incorporated, through myth and metaphor, into poetry. In "North American Time," she writes "Poetry never stood a chance / of standing outside History," and in an earlier poem, "On Edges," the speaker addresses a male explorer. In the context of considering their past relationship and his current treatment of her, she associates her role as a poet with her evaluation of history and says, "I am still piecing / what syllables I can / translating at top speed like a thinking machine / that types out useless as monster / and history as lampshade." Whether the Holocaust can or should stand outside of History has been sharply debated, but clearly Rich associates history and Nazi brutality with women's oppression, and the Nazi atrocities have been fully absorbed imaginatively in Rich's strongly feminist consciousness.

Surprisingly, few critics have addressed the role of the Holocaust in Rich's poetry, or commented on her powerful and directed use of it to forward her feminist perspective. However, a somewhat analogous usage of the Holocaust to political ends can be found in Peter Weiss's The Investigation, a play based on the Auschwitz War Crimes Trials in Frankfurt of 1963 and 1965, and the critical response to this play is relevant to discussion of both Rich and Reznikoff. Beyond exposing the evil in the Nazi fascist structure, Weiss had a strongly political aim. Explaining his position on this in an interview, Weiss states:

> I do not identify myself any more with the Jews than I do with the people of Vietnam or the blacks in South Africa. I see Auschwitz as a scientific instrument that could have been used by anyone to exterminate anyone. For that matter, given a different deal, the Jews could have been on the side of the Nazis. They too could have been the exterminators. The Investigation is a universal human problem (in Clausen, p132).

Rosenfeld, however, is strongly critical of such a view, and replies that "To see Auschwitz in such terms is, of course, not to want to see it at all," and claims Weiss's play marks a "failure of both artistic and moral vision" (Rosenfeld 1980, p158). James Baldwin, too, was criticised for his writing in which black militant Angela Davis was compared to a Jewish housewife in a boxcar headed for Dachau (Friedman, p.xii). The approach taken by Weiss, Rich and others in universalising the Holocaust by comparison to all suffering and oppression world-wide, whatever the moral function it may serve elsewhere, can only erode the importance of the Holocaust itself as a singular unparalleled event in human history.

The difficulties Rich faces in employing the Holocaust to her political ends are quite different from those affecting Plath, Sexton or Kumin. Rich does not trivialise the Holocaust, nor usurp the plight of millions to express personal pain. Rich, instead, examines the role of art in atrocity, and re-evaluates history, including the Holocaust, in terms of man's oppression of women. Whether such reinterpretation is ever justified in regard to the Holocaust is something Rosenfeld strongly denies, and whether the oppression of women is severe enough to warrant comparison to the Holocaust is something Ezrahi or Langer might deny. However, although Rich did not address the Holocaust in many of her poems, she is an important and influential enough poet that the lack of any criticism levelled at her use of the Holocaust suggests that, as much as possible, she has achieved a balance between the historical and poetic with regard to the Holocaust, an accomplishment few poets have achieved.

16. Denise Levertov

Denise Levertov, in her poetry addressing the Holocaust, is neither confessional nor feminist, but aspects of her approach to this subject bear resemblance to the other poets discussed already. Like Kumin, Levertov shares a faith in the restorative power of art; like Sexton, Levertov explores man's inhumanity, and his capacity for evil through Eichmann and the 1961 trial; Like Rich, Levertov is keenly political in her poetry, addressing the barbarism of war and Vietnam in particular through much of her poetry. However, unlike any of these poets, the centrality of the Holocaust in Levertov's poetry is preserved; her political agenda, intellectual exploration and personal needs do not eclipse the Holocaust itself, which remains inviolate, as a reference point rather than a vehicle.

In addition to her use of the Holocaust, Levertov's approach to poetry has affinities with Elie Wiesel's; both draw from Hasidism, a Jewish Mysticism. Acknowledging its influence in one of her essays, Levertov points out that her father, an Anglican clergyman, was a convert from a sect of Jewish mystics.

Like Maxine Kumin, Levertov focuses on the restorative power of her poetry. As Malkoff observes, she "finds in art, in creativity, a means of reestablishing harmony with the universe" (Malkoff 1973, p175). With a faith in the humanising power of art even more encompassing than Alvarez's, Levertov's poetry has an almost revelatory function. Levertov's view of poetry is congruent with the Hasidic belief in the physical world's revelation of the eternal. She has also noted that her enumeration in poetry of the things of this world is like the Hasidic celebration of a similar nature. In his article "Denise Levertov," the critic George Bowering claims that she "extends the idea of poetry as religion" (Bowering, p77).

Her aesthetic sensitivity, therefore, was perhaps more profoundly affected by the Holocaust than was Kumin's. Levertov's poetry suggests and her essays argue that killing and war destroy the unities and connections in the world that are the subjects for poetry. James Mersmann, author of Out of the Vietnam Vortex: A Study of Poets and Poetry against

the War, observes that to Levertov, war is the "ultimate unreason...[and] the violation of the innate order of things" (Mersmann, p79). Consequently, it poses the greatest threat to poetry. Somewhat like William Carlos Williams, Levertov explores the relationships of the things in the world. She states this purpose in the essay "Origins of a Poem" in which she argues "it is the poet who has language in his care; the poet who more than others recognises language also as a form of life and a common resource to be cherished and served as we shall serve and cherish earth and its waters, animals and vegetable life, and each other" (Levertov 1973, p53). Levertov's objection to war might thus be thought of as both spiritual and moral.

The Vietnam War mobilised her moral forces and largely contributed to her self-definition as a poet. Beginning in the late 1960s, that war became an increasingly familiar subject of her poems, and contributed to the growing consciousness of the Holocaust by Levertov and other American poets. The Sorrow Dance includes poems on the death of her sister and concludes with eight war poems. The previous year, Levertov had edited Out of the War Shadow: An Anthology of Current Poetry published by the War Resisters League. In the poems, she most often identifies with the Vietnamese women and expresses this explicitly in a journal of her experiences in Hanoi in 1972, "Glimpses of Vietnamese Life." Like the journal, the poems are highly personal reactions. The poet seems to exercise her writing powers for two purposes: to make the reader aware of Vietnam (and the young people's resistance to the American government's position) and other atrocious situations such as the one in Biafra, and to envision and consider these events for her understanding of them. For example, in "The Advent," from Relearning the Alphabet, she presents an ironic juxtaposition of Robert Southwell's mediation of the Christ child in the "Burning Babe" to images of burning Vietnamese children: thus she meditates on the war (Levertov 1966, p4). What feminism was for Rich, the Vietnam war was for Levertov.

A six page poem, "During the Eichmann Trial" appeared in The Jacob's Ladder and predates the Vietnam poems by a number of years. In some ways it prefigures the later poems, and in others it differs considerably. As in the later poems, the poet confronts the historical event and attempts to understand it. However, in these poems she does not identify with the victims of Eichmann's evil in the way she will later identify with the Vietnamese victims. Like Sexton, though with much greater distance, Levertov explores the moral and ethical issue of Eichmann's capacity for evil.

The poem is in three parts: "When we Look Up," "The Peachtree," and "Crystal Night." Sydra Ezrahi and Sophie Blaydes are in agreement that the key theme is the fact that Eichmann is part of humanity so that when we look at him, we see reflections of ourselves, and this is introduced in the first part of the poem (Ezrahi, p207; Blaydes, p502). The poem opens didactically addressing this theme. Eichmann stands in a glass booth at his trial in Jerusalem: "He had not looked, / pitiful man whom none / pity, whom all / must pity if they look / into their own face..." (Levertov 1961, p61). Another theme introduced in the first part is the tragedy in Eichmann's separation of himself from his victims, in his ability to cut himself off from humanity. Part One of the poem is concluded by this theme after Eichmann's rationale for his behaviour, that he was raised to be obedient. He is an "apparition / telling us something he / does not know: we are members of one another." Levertov's moral stance is existential in its emphasis on one's responsibility to recognise the otherness in him or herself and in others.

Another motif introduced in the first part is like those in other poems on the Holocaust by poets such as Hecht and Sexton. This motif is the representation in ironic images of the incomprehensible number of people slaughtered. Thus, Levertov ironically suggests fertility and God's presence when the speaker says:

...I see
a spring of blood gush from the earth--
Earth cannot swallow
so much at once
a fountain
rushes toward the sky
unrecognised
a sign--

The second part, "The Peachtree," is very roughly based on an event Eichmann actually recounted at the trial-- the only death for which he was directly responsible. In Levertov's version, Eichmann has shot a boy who was accused of stealing fruit from a tree. In a short narrative passage, which calls to mind the devil's presence in the garden of Eden, "mister death" personifies Eichmann. Levertov presents "mister death" as selfish and mindless as he "orders / more transports / [and] then eats" the peach the boy had taken. The colloquial yet derisive "mister death" anticipates Sexton's and Plath's response to death as well as to fascism and to themselves. In addition, it should be pointed out that Levertov's suggestion that Nazi murder is mindless in its causes and its enactments parallels Hannah Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil in her book Eichmann in Jerusalem. However, as with Snodgrass, Levertov's implication is no less contentious than was Arendt's thesis, which goes almost so far as suggesting that the Holocaust could have happened to anybody.

The last part of Levertov's poem, "Crystal Night," is based upon the infamous Kristallnacht [night of the broken glass] in 1938, which marked the first violent attack on synagogues and Jewish stores by the Gestapo. Levertov creates a physical and psychological landscape of violence. Implicit images of rape dominate the passage:

The scream!
The awaited scream rises,
the shattering
of glass and the cracking
of bone

a polar tumult as when
black ice booms, knives
of glass and ice
splitting and splintering the silence into
innumerable screaming needles.

Rather than enumerate specific acts of violence, Levertov meditates on the psychological implications of violence. The passage begins with the image of "blacked-out streets" and continues with the heightened description of violence such as the one above, and concludes with a statement which is concrete but which also has a universal application:

smashing the windows of sleep and dream
smashing the windows of history
a whiteness scattering
in hail stones
each a mirror
for man's eyes.

Finally, she exhorts the reader to recognise himself in Eichmann. This is done very artfully through the recapitulation of the first part of the poem and the mirror motif.

In these poems, Levertov maintains a consistent degree of factuality with regard to the Holocaust. Levertov quite artfully addresses the sources of man's inhumanity, the potential for evil in all of us, and her passionate objections to the Vietnam war, using recourse to the Holocaust to drive forward her individual outlook with a purposefulness reminiscent of Rich. However, in spite of her application of the Holocaust to the universal, the concept of the Holocaust in all these contexts does not lose its singularity. Levertov is very much aware of history, and the careful relationship between history and art; she treats both with gravity and respect.

17. Stephen Berg and Van Brock

Stephen Berg and Van Brock are very much post-Holocaust poets. Some of their poems refer explicitly to the ovens, hair, smoke and death of Auschwitz, but more importantly their approach to all poetry, and the

landscape of their poetic world, display the scars left by the Holocaust upon the poetic imagination.

Both poets are very much aware of the extent to which the Holocaust is an important source in their poetry. In different poems, their handling of this subject bears similarities with Plath (for her extremity), Sexton (for her awareness of the evil within us) and Levertov (for her political orientation against war). However, in most of their poems, Berg and Brock do not address the Holocaust for any specific purpose, be it personal, political or documentary. Furthermore, most of their "Holocaust poems" do not directly address the Holocaust at all. Instead, these poets are among those to which Ries, Malkoff and Steiner referred, grappling with a world indelibly changed by the events at Auschwitz. As quoted from Rosenfeld previously, "The human imagination after Auschwitz is simply not the same" (Rosenfeld 1980, p13). Recognising how heavily this recent history weighs upon their artistic sensitivities, they respond to the need for a new landscape and language of poetry, as called for by Kremer and Langer. Recalling Lawrence Ries's statement on the subject, each poet was "left with a feeling of impotency and anonymity with which he was unable to cope. To compensate for this feeling of loss, he must assert himself in whatever way possible, the more violent and extreme the better" (Ries, p12). Therefore, like Plath, Stephen Berg and Van Brock push limits of taste and acceptability. However, they provoke questions of what marks acceptable poetry more than what marks acceptable usage of the Holocaust; the dilemma they face is in achieving a new landscape, characterised by graphic violence, sexual coercion, surreal images and a dream-like rejection of reason.

Stephen Berg has published three books of poetry and has edited and translated several volumes of poems. His second book of poems, The Daughters, includes a number of his better poems which address or are affected by the theme of Nazi destruction of the Jews. Because Berg strives to be innovative in much of what he writes, he is difficult to classify. He is not a confessional poet like Sexton and Plath in that he often

assumes a Whitmanesque persona. In addition, the speaker's associative sequences and the poet's surreal images call to mind the beat verse of Allan Ginsberg, who shocked the reading public in the fifties with his Whitmanesque, non-conformist, sometimes neurotic incantations. Although it may be argued that Berg sometimes appears undisciplined and gratuitous in his use of sexual imagery, Ralph Mills argues that it is in the effort to encompass "the irony, fatality, and suffering of a life everywhere overshadowed by mortality, a life unredeemed and unaccounted for neither by reason or by any known God...that Berg often stretched words and syntax to their extreme limits." (Mills, here, echoes the more general statement by Mailer cited previously.) In writing such poetry, Berg enacts in verse many of the trends suggested by Ries, Malkoff and Murdoch previously. In his early responses to American militarism, Nazism, racism and God's "disappearance," he echoes many poets who have addressed the Holocaust, and in his fractured syntax he bears similarities with Paul Celan, though Berg is much less lyrical.

Many of the poems that treat these themes contain vivid graphic images. Berg's psychological and sociological insights are conveyed through sexual imagery; annihilation, for example, is represented by images of castration. This association is similar to the one in the poetry of Karl Shapiro and is the counterpart of Plath's and Sexton's sado-masochistic vision. Thus, Berg associates sexual abuses with Hitler's genocide, which may be thought of as having the dual intent of enslaving [raping] and destroying [castrating] a race.

One of Berg's poems, from his 1971 collection <u>The Daughters</u>, which treats several of these themes is "Entering the Body." It recalls Whitman's poetry in the employment of parallelism and the collective "I". The theme, like that of Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," is death, but rather than celebrate life in death and death in life, Berg presents the vision of what might be viewed as a paranoid persona. He wants "to be a fat man in America / and carry a gun" so that if <u>they</u> "take one piece of me each year-- / the lobe, the glands, the lid, the cap, / the pit--" he could be "as fat /

as an elephant and rule and demand / all others fall to their knees / and serve me." On one level here, Berg is parodying the American myth that everyone can be his or her own king. Since the dream is held by a paranoid man afraid of an unidentified they, Berg suggests that the sources of the dream are corrupt. On another level, Berg undercuts the speaker's quest for power because he is first associated imagistically with the victims of the power-crazed through the enumeration of the parts of his body they take of him each year. In addition, later the speaker directly associates himself with the victims of the Holocaust: "my fists hardened many days / in the last ovens." It is the emblematic significance of word, ovens, that suggests the extent of the speaker's victimisation. Like "hair" and "lampshade," "oven" has entered the poet's and his audience's collective consciousness. The earlier enumeration of the parts of his body suggests castration and is not unlike Plath's self-sacrifice, or strip tease, for her father, her Nazi enemy doctor.

Another poem by Berg, "In the Monument Works," also associates castration with violence to the Jews. This long and difficult poem is composed of a series of dream-like images. It criticises the role of the United States in Southeast Asia, and the quest for material wealth. It also portrays Jewish paranoia in America. In addition, Berg suggests that the source of his poetry is his identification with the vulnerability of the Jews.

Beyond that, he acknowledges his kinship to another Jewish poet who wrote on the Holocaust. Berg briefly summaries a dreamlike poem by Irving Feldman, "The Pripet Marshes" in which Feldman envisions the invasion of his Jewish American community. In this vision, by the power of his thoughts, he is able to save the community temporarily (Feldman, pp44-47). Near the end of "In the Monument Works," Berg writes that this poet came for him "hammering out the moist wall / between our houses, / [and] discovered me curled deep in blankets..." Later Berg refers to him as "master." Berg seems to have mistaken the identity of the poet since he addresses him as Shapiro, presumably the poet Karl Shapiro, another Jewish poet of the Holocaust, instead of Irving Feldman. The confusion

reveals Berg's association of the Nazi /Jewish theme found in the writing of both poets.

Although there is no reference to this theme in the first stanza of "In the Monument Works," it is prefigured imagistically. The first stanza seems to be about the act of creation in turning stone to figure. The second stanza opens with the setting envisioned in the Feldman poem of raiding Germans, so that the beginning "Shoes pointing upward...the walls bulging in places, half / an angel's wing trapped in its journey out of the stone" conveys not only creation, but also its opposite: death in the gas chamber. The image of the angel also appears in several of Radnoti's poems. Radnoti, who was captured by the Nazis, writes poetry responding to beauty despite his world of death. Safe, protected by time and place, Berg apparently associates his perception as a creator, a poet, with his awareness of the Holocaust. The title, "In the Monument Works" suggests the activity of making monuments rather than the stasis of the finished memorial. It is in this activity that he finds his identity as a poet.

Berg's association of poetry with the Holocaust is suggested by the poem which directly follows "In the Monument Works," "Desnos Reading the Palms of Men on Their Way to the Gas Chambers." The monologue is roughly based on a report on the French poet, Robert Desnos, who died at Buchenwald. The poem is introduced by a quotation from Desnos and a note that while in a line bound for the gas chambers, he rushed from prisoner to prisoner predicting their good fortune as he read their palms. Spoken in Desnos' voice, the monologue is made up of images of the concentration camp landscape, the speaker's observations on his own past, present and future, and his mystical visions of the other prisoners' fortunes. Thus, midway through the poem he says:

> There's a shallow hole over the bed
> on the wall behind my head
> where my dreams live on
> ...

I look into it and if I concentrate
I see bodies decorated with
God's toil and ashes
They drift
into the mouths and eyes
of the living
until there is nothing
but children
like us here.

Like Sexton, Plath and Kumin, Berg condenses the results of the Nazi killing-machine into what might be termed 'world-signs' or 'essence-words'. Berg also personifies the signs of death saying, for example, there is nothing "except / the smile of a boot, the eyes of gloves, the mouth of belt..." The signs and remains of the dead have been an obsession of the confessional poets.

Music, as in so many poems by Americans on the Holocaust, also surfaces: the camp orchestra is alluded to in Berg's poem. Another familiar theme here is the sexual implications of mass annihilation. Images of castration appear in "Desnos Reading the Palms of Men..." As in Berg's other poems, castration and death are linked. The speaker sees a "little boy with dark brown eyes" and thinks, "You hide your penis fearfully / behind it, [hand] making a pathetic cup / while the other hand dangles / like a noose..." Then the speaker associates impotence if not castration with his own predicament:

Like a blind clown I dance between
rifles and the laughter of kings,
and it must be my withered cock and balls,
the colour of stone walls,
that cause so much happiness
in the ranks...

This is contrasted with his idealised future when he "will marry and have children." The irony in this vision both conveys the personal tragedy of death in the camps and the very core of genocide. The irony in many of Berg's phrases is often paralleled by the discordance in fractured syntax.

Like Ginsberg, Berg often presents a persona that is totally alienated from mainstream America. In addition, he presents himself as in some sense victimised, which is not only as a consequence of his relationship to society but also a result of his view of himself and society. In poems that treat the theme of the Holocaust, he identifies with the Jewish victims. He views the Jewish plight psychologically and translates it into sexual terms. Mysticism is not to be found, as it is in Levertov's poems.

However, the surreal sequences in Berg's poems do suggest a peculiar version of transcendence. Discursive thought, calculation, and logic are abandoned by Berg. That aspect of cognitive ability enabled the Nazis to destroy 10,000 people in Auschwitz daily. Accordingly, Berg speaks in the language of the unconscious in fractured syntax, and addresses the human quest for love and death. Although his poems could be further refined, they are powerful. It is likely that Berg's excesses are what makes the poems effective, and very much reflective of the Holocaust's impact on the poet's sensitivity.

Van Brock, a child in rural Georgia during the second world war, began to write poetry in the early 1970s. Like Berg, many of his poems have a political orientation, but addressing a variety of diverse issues. Brock does not embrace any obviously political ideology or employ well-worn images. Instead, through poems that allude to war, racism or the survival of wildlife, in The Hard Essential Landscape he explores the fragile connections between men in society and man in the natural world. Brock's Holocaust poems are often associated with his moral objections to the Vietnam War and racism, the two most important political issues in America during the late 1960s. In his more recent poems, Brock's orientation is less obviously political and more personal. Through tone and imagery they project a speaker's gestalt: his perceptions, feelings and reactions. The sensibility revealed, however, bears all the attributes of a post-Holocaust poet.

In the main, Brock's poems on the Holocaust describe a camp inmate. The speaker is unidentified, distant. The syntax is simple, the

language direct so that his readers cannot direct their attention away from the terrible picture before them. Through their appearance and reappearance, vivid images such as hair, birds, lips, breasts and thread gain metaphoric meaning. The poems form what might be termed a Holocaust 'Gestalt', in their conveyance of the psychology in the oppressor-victim relationship. For example, Nazi-master and Jew-slave are symbolised in the relationship between SS soldier and whore or mutilated woman.

Since the symbolic import does not diminish the vivid depiction of rape and mutilation, the reader reacts emotionally, without intellectual distancing. For example, in "Locust Angel," one victim is portrayed. It begins:

> She is bald,
> Her breasts half-pink plums,
> Panties and stockings fallen; The pink slip under her shirtwaist
> Crumpled by a large hand.

Similarly, a pathetic ex-virgin is depicted in the ironically titled "Earth Goddess." Soldiers "have stripped her for use" and issued her "a year of life and a helmet thorned / with teeth to train her eyes on blankness."

In "Buchenwald," which portrays a sexually mutilated woman, the images are both oddly visual and conceptual at once:

> Her hands join hands of scream that tear out hair
> To wreathe her neck with knowledge. Or was it the surgery
> Of the doctors whose shirt she wears that sheared her?

Here and elsewhere, Brock bombards his reader with the concrete and abstract horrors of the death camps. However, it is a reaction of the reader on the instinctual level that the poems evoke: a response unmediated by reason.

It in this respect that Brock best demonstrates the new post-Holocaust poetry described by Steiner and Malkoff, stripped of humanist values and post-Enlightenment assumptions. His poems do not merely pull the reader underwater, but into the man-made hell of Auschwitz. The images elicit two reactions. First, he is shocked by the terrible images before his eyes, and second, he experiences the shock of recognition: the

inclination toward cruelty and the seduction of suffering are not totally alien. Although the latter point, at least, has been addressed in the poetry of Levertov and Sexton, both Brock's and Berg's use of graphic detail, violence, vivid rape and mutilation is new to poetry of the Holocaust. As with the Holocaust atrocities themselves, in these poems reason is rejected and a terrible violence embraced and exploited. These poets seek to provide what Kremer demanded, a "language appropriate to the Nazi universe, language to convey a bureaucracy of evil...a new artistic style" (p29). Although their poetry suffers aesthetically as a result, they felt such departures necessary is a sign of the Holocaust's impact upon the poetic imagination. The challenges Brock and Berg face in writing Poetry after Auschwitz, and the avenues they explore in response, are common to many poets.

18. W.D. Snodgrass

W.D. Snodgrass is an accomplished and skilful poet, and like Berg and Brock his poetry is informed by approaches characteristic of post-Holocaust poetry. However, his poems addressing the Holocaust explicitly present an extreme equal only to Sylvia Plath in their misuse of this most sensitively guarded matter of history. Perhaps, like Sexton, he avoids attack from some critics because his focus lies more with the Nazis than the Jews; perhaps his concerted and focused use of the Holocaust to explore a non-personal subject of significance to society, namely the psychological underpinnings of fascism, mollified other critics.

However, Snodgrass displays no identification with either Nazis or Jews. He was not interested in the Holocaust or the Nazis as subjects or historical realities in themselves. They simply provided for him convenient and attractive subjects for his examination of human psychology.

W.D. Snodgrass served in the American navy in the Pacific during World War II. Since the war, he became interested in the Nazi leaders' success in their quest for power. Both the Pulitzer prize winning Heart's Needle and After Experience focus on the psychology of character, and The

Fuhrer Bunker: A Cycle of Poems in Progress follows with a series of dramatic monologues in the voices of Adolf Hitler, Albert Speer, Joseph Goebbels, Magda Goebbels, Eva Braun and several others, spoken during the final days in the Bunker in April 1945. After Experience is more diversified, including translations and a series of poems based on impressionist paintings in addition to poems that explore past events in the poet's life.

This volume also initiates Snodgrass' focus on the Nazis and evil. "A Visitation," introduced by a quotation from Arendt on Eichmann, is in the form of a dialogue between the poet and Eichmann's ghost. Arendt's statement makes plain that from the world's point of view, Eichmann is the epitome of evil, and therefore must die. However, through Eichmann's appearance in the poem, Snodgrass suggests killing him did not bring about evil's demise. In addition, through the content of the dialogue, Snodgrass intimates that Eichmann is not so far removed from the rest of humanity as people assumed when they decided his death was justified. For example, the poet is guilty of having "chained men to a steel beam on command." Eichmann then claims that it was "luck, friend, not character" which determines their difference (Snodgrass 1968, p45).

This view is quite similar to Arendt's thesis, and equally contentious. Snodgrass here denies the singularity of what has become the central event in modern Jewish history, and like Weiss, suggests that given a "different deal" it could have been anyone (Clausen, p132). Furthermore, his reference to luck brings to mind the "weird luck" to which Sylvia Plath referred when recreating her life in the image of a Jew sent to die in the gas chambers in the much-debated poem "Daddy." The atrocities committed by the Nazis and the suffering and death of six million Jews cannot easily be dispensed with as a matter of mere chance. Leon Wieseltier criticised Plath heavily for this reference, and it would be instructive to recall his comment that "Auschwitz bequeathed to art perhaps the most arresting of all possible metaphors for extremity, but its availability has been abused" (p20). Although Sylvia Plath may have "broken the ice," twelve years later

Snodgrass cannot pass up the Holocaust as a vehicle for his own investigation of extremes in human character.

A further area of contention is the moral function Snodgrass finds in his poetry. Unlike Alvarez, who sees the beauty of art as a stay against barbarism, or Rosenfeld, who believes the role of Holocaust literature is to inform the reader of the Nazi atrocities and Jewish suffering, Snodgrass claims:

> The aim of a work of art surely is to stretch the reader's psyche, to help him identify with more people, with more life than he normally does. He is only going to be able to do that if you get him past his beliefs about right and wrong...(Gaston 1977, p303).

Relinquishing "beliefs about right and wrong" is the very antithesis of any moral position, and in its aim to help the reader identify with Nazi and Jew alike, Snodgrass' poetry will only serve, as Rosenfeld has stated, to "profane the victims' memories and exonerate their executioners" (Rosenfeld 1980, p160). Like Snodgrass' support of Arendt's thesis, his view of art's moral function is diametrically opposed to the strong opinions held by most critics of Holocaust literature.

In The Fuhrer Bunker, Snodgrass explores the deceit and self-awareness of these heinous figures in the effort to understand them, and himself, better. Although his choice and use of these subjects are highly questionable, he does create a masterful texture of language through tone, diction, rhyme and metre that ironically serves to imitate and undercut the Nazi use of language and rhetoric.

Susan Sontag is the only critic to have written significantly on Holocaust literature who might ignore these issues and evaluate Snodgrass' poetry for its considerable aesthetic and technical value alone. Other non-Jewish critics, who are often less concerned with the problematics imposed by the Holocaust, have praised the poetry of Snodgrass as well wrought because a poem's form has major thematic significance, or as Paul Gaston points out in his book on Snodgrass, the form "conveys information about a character that could not be effectively conveyed otherwise." For example, Snodgrass uses puns and trimeter couples to convey Goebbel's

character and his monologues increase in rigidity so that according to Gaston, "the meanness of the man's mind as he approaches his end becomes more and more clear" (Gaston 1978, pp150-151).

For the Third Reich architect, Albert Speer, Snodgrass' stanzas open with one word, and then each successive line becomes one word longer until the final line, which is shorter. The stanzas resemble the cross-section of a staircase that suddenly falls off. However, the structure breaks down entirely in passages in which Speer confronts the impending destruction of the Third Reich and where he confronts his own moral weakness and corruption.

Magda Goebbels, the wife of the Propaganda Chief, speaks in the most structured monologues. She has moved to the bunker with her six children in preparation for killing them and herself. The monologues take the form of four villanelles, four triolets, and a redoubled rondo. According to Stephen Yenser, in a review of the book, "The ceaseless repetition of refrain and rhyme--through all 175 lines of her verse Snodgrass uses only three rhymes-- comports with a mind whose obsessiveness is a response to intolerable feelings....Her forms are nearly hysterical little rituals that keep her fear and self-disgust at bay" (Yenser, p88). In the first monologue speaking of her children, but not indicating she will kill them, she repeatedly says, "We must preserve them from disloyalty" and "How could we let them fall to treachery" (Snodgrass 1977, pp23- 24).

Eva Braun's monologues are not nearly as structured. They are counterpointed by the intrusion of other texts. In her first, for example, lines from "Tea for Two," her favourite American song, regularly interrupt her thoughts. Ironically, while she bemoans how she is rejected by everyone around Hitler and considers her impending suicide, she thinks of the lyrics from the popular song. The monologue opens,

Tea for Two
And two for tea

I ought to feel ashamed
Feeling such joy....
All of them have come to die, And they grieve
I have come here to die...(p38)

Later she punctuates a stanza "...We live / Like flies sucked up in a sweeper bag" with the lyrics from the song, "And start to bake / A sugar cake" (p40). In Braun's second monologue after her civil wedding to Hitler, while he is dictating his will, she thinks about how she managed to attract him and their preparation for suicide.

In counterpoint to these thoughts are lines from the Catholic Mass and marriage liturgy. The biblical Consummatum Est is followed by, "To be soon consumed and / never consummated." The holy praise, "O Thou who hast created / all things out of nothing..." is followed by "Now each one has nothing / they fought for. We have earned / our deaths..." (p41). The combination of the mindless sentimental song and the realism of the monologue that includes themes of suicide, murder and lust succinctly conveys the madness of the Nazi empire, which seemed to be propelled by the death instinct.

Hitler is the embodiment of this instinct. As he looks upon the body of Braun before he commits suicide, he tallies up the millions he has killed: One of his monologues opens, "More than fifty millions. More / Who kill that much; who else?" (p42). He continues to complain that not many Germans have died, "German: spineless worms. Only four... / four hundred...only four...[ellipses in text]" (p63). He even seems to revel in the thought of his own death. The poem concludes: "I pick my time, my place, I take / this capsule tight between my teeth... / Set this steel cold against my jaw... / Clench, clench...and once more I / Am winning, winning, / winning...[ellipses in text]" (p64).

Images of perverted sex, eating, and violence and the themes of betrayal and death dominate Hitler's monologues, as they do much of the poetry informed by the Holocaust regardless of subject. Some of the recurrent images in The Fuhrer Bunker are of Hitler eating chocolate cake, and of scatophilia. Snodgrass suggests that the death of Hitler's mother and his fear of death were the source of his desire to devour Europe and, less importantly, his compulsion to eat cake and his perverted sexuality. In addition he suggests that Hitler's manipulation of his mother in driving away

his half brother Alois was an early manifestation of his ability and desire to manipulate others.

In Hitler's first monologue, the death of his mother is introduced. He says, "The day the buried her, I thought / Time now; time. I cannot live" Then, after a digression on one of his betrayers, Ernst Roehm, he continues, "I feel already this ground / Swallow me. I shall / Swallow all this ground / Till we two are one flesh" (p12). The poem ends on the motif of eating when Hitler says, "We could still find a little chocolate cake? / A little schlag perhaps" (p13).

Hitler's sexual perversion is one of the main subjects Snodgrass presents in the second Hitler monologue, which is set on the day of his birthday party. As his sexual partner crouches over him, he recalls, she may "release / her urine, open her bowels. The danger of taking this matter in his / mouth heightens the excitement" (p28). Hitler's thoughts jump from one of these subjects to the other, and Snodgrass thereby suggests and implicit connection between them. In this context, Hitler also mentally chastises enemy generals, thinks of a childhood memory in which he ate his brother's birthday cake and spat on the remainder, and complains of blond-haired Jews "who, would steal our birthright, / Pull us down into putrescence, slime?" He then reflects on the pleasant memory when his mother "made a special cake for me-- / Only the two of us together" (p28). Snodgrass suggests that Hitler's childhood experiences and his reaction to them are in part responsible for the warped personality that determined the man. Far from appearing as a great conqueror, in these poems Hitler is seen as a wretched man who is a slave to his compulsions.

Snodgrass' portrait of Hitler's weakness is also conveyed through the form of the monologues. Each phrase is interrupted by another phrase on another thought. One obsession cuts off another. These interruptions cannot even be called digressions because the monologues lack a single logical threat. This is even carried out on a syntactical level. Most of Hitler's thoughts take the form of fragmented sentences; often a thought trails off completely, as indicated by ellipses. For example, a stanza from

Hitler's third monologue includes ellipses and what appear to be non sequiturs that are successively unclear:

> Shovelling lime in latrine, Oh,
> It's a dragon seed. We played it three times;
> No satisfaction. Not even...(p63).

Hitler's madness is suggested by not only the lack of logic behind what he thinks but also by his language. His diction is that of a brutal man, as when he says, "Pricks, the stink of jism" and "Scrawny / Pizzle wouldn't come again" (pp62-63). The first stanza of Hitler's first monologue, which opens the book, sets the tone:

> Down: I got it all. Almost
> Brat; fed on sugartits.
> Shreds, chunks, chewed-over
> Races. It rises up again.
> Say I spoiled my appetite. (p11)

Although these poems may display some technical mastery and have a gripping, voyeuristic appeal to them, they are rife, in my opinion, with bold challenges to what is acceptable in both poetry and the Holocaust within it. These poems challenge taste and decorum far more forcefully than do the poetry of Berg and Brock, and do so with a continual focus on the agents primarily responsible for the deaths of millions. The perversion and extremes of Snodgrass' poetry and his use of the Holocaust is of a histrionic nature comparable only to Sylvia Plath. Furthermore, in order to unify the cycle of poems and present consistent psychological portraits of these figures, Snodgrass has taken many liberties in his presentation. In justifying this, he implies that what is psychologically credible is more important than actual events. In The Fuhrer Bunker he allows his imagination to be his guide. Snodgrass gives his imagination free reign since his main focus is on the psychology of character: that is, his own character, and the psychology of the Nazis in the bunker.

In freely tampering with the historical details, particularly when they are interspersed with actual quotations from recorded conversations and letters, he violates what Langer has described as a careful balance between

history and art maintained around the Holocaust, and ignores Elie Wiesel's most basic injunction that the memories of the Holocaust remain inviolate. However, not only are the content and facts of Snodgrass' poetry subject to perversion, but also the moral message presented through the poems.

The Nazis symbolise two qualities which Snodgrass perceives as central to what constitutes humanity and art. They are history's outstanding examples of evil and disguise. "I am sure" says Snodgrass, in the interview with Gaston, "that being willing to identify with what you think is evil is perhaps what is most crucial to making a work of art that has some kind of breadth" (Gaston 1977, pp407-408). Demonstrating the extent to which Snodgrass' world-view has been affected by the Holocaust and Second World War, he goes so far as to claim, in the preface to his book of essays, In Radical Pursuit, "Every important act in our lives is both propelled and guided by the darker, less visible areas of emotion and personality" (Snodgrass 1975, pxii). From the point of view of good art, then, the Nazis are good subjects. This idea, of course, would be anathema to such critics as Adorno, Wiesel, Steiner and Baumgart.

Although Snodgrass displays a far greater influence of the Holocaust in his poetry than does Plath, his equally if not more problematic employment of it has received far less attention. Certainly, Snodgrass is less well known than Plath, but it may also be that, as Langer predicted, with the passage of time the Holocaust has become more a matter of history alone. This, of course, would indicate some failing in the attempts by Alvarez, Wiesel, and the majority of Jews around the world to keep the memory alive.

However, Snodgrass' use of Holocaust has indeed provoked a reasonable degree of outrage among critics, even among those who do not ordinarily concern themselves with such themes. For example, Hugh Kenner in a review finds no virtue in the cycle and wonders "...why Snodgrass should be wasting his gifts on an attempt to outdo 'the banality of evil.'." He goes on to say, echoing Wyschogrod, that "Those deaths, in that bunker, were self-conscious bad art-- perhaps the one thing poetry can't

transcend" (Kenner, p23). In response to a play version of the cycle performed in New York City in 1981, drama critic Michael Feingold questions the validity of Snodgrass' intentions and posits that he "intends nothing, that the subject coming to him, was too intriguing to pass up, and too worked over for him to avoid all its pitfalls and potential cliches" (Feingold, p93).

Indeed, Snodgrass, twelve years later, is very much like Sylvia Plath in succumbing to what may be a self-aggrandising attempt to tap into a source more powerful than his poetry could bear. As Rosenfeld explains,

> The literary imagination can be easily seduced by the erotic underside of totalitarian terror and readily accept it as a metaphor for what exists just beneath the normal life of social and sexual behaviour (1980, p139).

Although, like Berg and Brock, the approach Snodgrass takes is much informed by developments in poetry since the Holocaust, Snodgrass retains the Holocaust, or how he imagines it, as the primary source for the content of his poetry, while simultaneously invoking almost all that early Holocaust critics have found unpardonable. If, as Gloria Young believes, "the best of the poets do not ask us to understand how such events could happen; they merely want us to hear and remember" (in Friedman, p535), then of the body of poetry focusing on the Holocaust, the poems by W.D. Snodgrass within The Fuhrer Bunker must be among the least successful.

19. William Heyen

If there are any American poets who in their poetry come close to fulfilling the moral criteria set down by Gloria Young and many other critics, William Heyen and Charles Reznikoff would be prime examples. Unlike Snodgrass, for whom the Holocaust was a matter of illustrative convenience and abstract moral fascination, both Heyen and Reznikoff felt some personal connection to the Holocaust which impacted on their poetry. Reznikoff wrote Holocaust partly because he was a Jew. This son of immigrants wrote on Jewish themes throughout his life, and by the early forties had

written poems on the history of anti-Semitism. As a young man he educated himself in Hebrew and the Scriptures (Hindus 1984, pp17-33). Heyen, born in 1940, had two German uncles who died in battle for Hitler, and as a child he found swastikas scrawled on his window. As a young man he became obsessed with the Nazi extermination of the Jews; in poetry his main purpose, as was Elie Wiesel's, is to make his readers remember (Friedman, p565). William Meredith's observation in a review article of Heyen's The Swastika Poems was particularly perceptive, and applies to both Heyen and Reznikoff equally:

> A number of poets in the middle generation today-- poets between 30 and 40-- seem to face a special predicament: They are not at home in recent history. It is not their nightmare (as it is the familiar nightmare of those of us who lived as adults through World War II), it is their parents' nightmare. To come of age as poets, they need to imagine their parents' history and to establish continuity with an elder violence....they need to come to grips with their heritage of violence, now they are mature. Further acts of praise and insight, further poems, depend on this (Meredith, p26).

Whitman's spectre was present in the poetry of Allan Ginsberg and Stephen Berg; this spectre emerges again in the poetry of William Heyen. Here it is not manifested in parallelism and meter but in Heyen's exploration of nature and man; in his view of the relationship between language and reality; and finally in the heightened sense of his role as a poet. Heyen is very much aware of the Whitman inheritance and alludes to him often in poems.

Heyen is, in addition, painfully aware of the gulf between Whitman and himself: the Nazi extermination of the Jews. In the essay "What Do the Trees Say" speaking of one of the death camps, he says, "We would never be the same. It might be that today, with our knowledge, none of us can enter totally or even partly for very long the transcendentalist faith in the beneficence of man, God, the world that Whitman felt" (Heyen 1976, p102). Heyen feels the gulf imposed by the Holocaust between this modern age and the previous humanism as keenly as did Norman Mailer and George Steiner. Two years later in 1978, in an important interview with Stanley

Rubin, he admits that the Holocaust is "at the centre of everything" he knows and feels "about this century" and about himself (Heyen & Rubin 1978, p41). The poems certainly bear out this feeling. In four years, Heyen published The Swastika Poems and two short special collections, My Holocaust Songs and The Trains. Unlike so many confessional poets, to Heyen, the Holocaust is not a metaphor for something else; it is an entity itself, a mystery, an obsession. These three books plot the imagination's course in one man's emotional and intellectual descent into the Nazi hell.

Heyen finds the undertaking almost overwhelming. One of the main problems that confronts him is the morality of writing on the subject: "to write a bad poem about the Holocaust," he says, "seemed/seems to me somehow worse than writing a bad poem about something else" (Heyen & Rubin, p39). Consumed by the problem of the artist writing on the suffering of others, he feels that he "was making morally important choices each time in regard to what poem followed what poem" in the book (p43). Unlike other poets, Heyen is keenly aware of the difficulties involved with writing poetry about the Holocaust mentioned by Kremer, Hindus and others; like Rosenfeld and Adorno, he is aware of the moral responsibilities associated with it.

In the interview with Rubin, Heyen points out that the last word in The Swastika Poems is *remember*, and then adds:

> I know that the theme of remembrance comes up often-- I wasn't conscious of how much it was coming up as the poems were being written, but it comes up again and again. It seems important to me that we as human being bear this experience with us in some sort of way that we can handle it without going crazy....The Holocaust is a part of the twentieth-century consciousness, and has to be (Rubin 49).

The moral responsibility is perhaps somewhat lessened in that the subject of the poems is often threefold: the Holocaust, the speaker's reaction to it, and the reader's potential reaction to these poems. In interviews and forewords, Heyen discusses the speaker as though he were another person and therefore discourages the reader from treating the

poems as though they represent the poet's conclusions on the Holocaust. Unlike Pound or Eliot, Heyen's purpose is not to present his criticism of Western culture. Instead, he treats the poems as though someone else had written them, and makes the same kind of observations readers might about the speaker and his subject. He says, for example, "As I see the poems now...they are primarily about the speaker. My interest is on him....During the course of the book he strains to find out who he is" (p37). Rather than promote a political or more personal agenda, his poems thus attempt to explore, almost equally, the meaning of the Holocaust itself and the speaker's reaction to it. However, given the fairly significant presence of the speaker in Heyen's poems, they are not purely documentary in nature.

Heyen's obsession with the Holocaust probably accounts for the unity in his poetry. Not only are the poems on the Holocaust unified in imagery, but perhaps of more interest, his poems on other subjects often employ similar images and are thereby thematically related. For example, in a series of poems, The Chestnut Rain, the central image of the tree which symbolises life and its destruction was prefigured by "The Tree" in The Swastika Poems, a prose poem about a Czechoslovakia village that the Germans completely destroyed (Heyen 1977, p47; 1986). Similarly, "Pigeons," from Long Island Night: Poems and a Memoir, deals with the slaughter of an overpopulation of pigeons in Kentucky. While implicitly alluding to the Jews, the speaker says that the dead birds seemed "to return the pulse of your thumb" which suggests genocidal guilt. This is echoed in "The Numinous," in The Swastika Poems, appearing contemporaneously, where the sudden flight of hundreds of pigeons in a present-day German city suggests both the souls of the Jewish dead and his awareness of the Jews' lives and death. The images of the pigeons in both poems have a haunting similarity.

The thematic similarities between poems on the Holocaust and on other subjects are in the exploration of death and the reasons for death. In many non-Holocaust poems, for example, Heyen considers the loss of a farmer's land that is sold and paved over, or the necessity behind the

farmer's killing a ewe or the drive behind a boy's hunger as he shoots a cat. Heyen, generally, resists the temptation to be sentimental or judgemental. His childhood associations and the adult fear of nuclear holocaust are thematically linked to the mystery underlying the death camps. Consequently, Heyen's vision is that of post-Holocaust man.

Concordant with this, like Plath and many other poets of the Holocaust, Heyen reveals on a number of occasions his ambivalence about God. Just as the camps baffle the mind, so God's role is equally riddling. Quoting from his journal, he says that it is difficult to believe that man is not "an ongoing experiment in whom God is uninterested," but he also affirms God's goodness when he asks God to help him rid himself "of the desire to kill other people (p19).

Heyen's main focus, very much in accordance with Rosenfeld's command to "register & record the enormity of human loss" (Rosenfeld 1980, p27), is often on the incomprehensible cruelty inflicted on the Jews by the Nazis. Unlike Snodgrass, Heyen does not seem to accept Hannah Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil. This probably accounts for the drive behind his forty or so Holocaust poems. In the main, the poems have been favourably received. Robert von Hallberg stands alone with his opinion in a review article that Heyen is patronising in tone, hackneyed in phrasing and mundane in description (Hallberg, pp120-121).

The Swastika Poems is divided into three parts. In the first, the speaker meditates on his German heritage, especially his relatives' roles in the Second World War; and his own neighbours' hostility against his family during the war because of his family heritage. In the second, he meditates, in a combination of poetry and quotations from trial documents, on the gas chambers in Bergen-Belsen. Finally, in the third part he recapitulates the first two parts with the experienced speaker pressing toward an assimilation of the facts of Auschwitz. The second book, My Holocaust Songs is more optimistic; it is the affirmative voice of someone who has endured the trial represented in the first book. A later book, The Trains, is bleak, composed mainly of meditations on Nazi barbarism. In addition, it explores the

Through awareness of and sensitivity to the many difficulties associated with poetry of the Holocaust, Heyen manages, with few exceptions, to resist the temptation to universalise and genuinely addresses the Holocaust itself, as both historical fact and as a source for haunting, powerful poetry. Quite deservedly, he is praised by Gloria Young for writing poetry which is "restrained, documentary, anguished" (in Friedman, p557). His moral and aesthetic accomplishment should serve, in my view, as a model for others to emulate, and marks one of the most successful instances of the use of Holocaust in American poetry.

20. Charles Reznikoff

The treatment of the Holocaust in poems by Charles Reznikoff marks perhaps the opposite extreme from poems by Sylvia Plath and W.D. Snodgrass. Drawing solely from testimony in the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials, Reznikoff translates so far as possible into poetry the documentary or testimonial approach endorsed by Adorno, Alvarez, Steiner, Rosenfeld and Alexander.

Reznikoff's Holocaust, his final book, was written in 1973 and published two years later. As in The Fuhrer Bunker, the poet does not attempt to impose a particular point of view on the reader; instead, he tries to elicit individual responses in his readers. Holocaust, a long poem, written three years before his death, is in keeping with the style he had developed thirty years earlier and represents a continuation of his interest in the history of the Jewish people.

Reznikoff has written so-called objectivist poetry throughout his career. The term *objectivism* was coined by Louis Zukofsky in 1931 when, after being recommended by Pound to edit a special edition of Poetry, Harriet Monroe asked him to label the writers included; objectivism, however, never had a strict definition. The poetry in the anthology and in later volumes continued the imagist trend away from symbolism and toward the particular that had begun almost twenty years earlier in Pound's "A few Don'ts for an Imagist," in the march 1913 edition of Poetry.

relationship between reality and language. For example, a meditation on Treblinka states "the camp's three syllables still sound like freight cars / straining around a curve Treblinka." Heyen also includes a piece from his journal that considers the effects of language on understanding, and repeats the claim of Steiner and Alvarez that "'moral' works of art can actually help to build a consensus for moral action" (Heyen 1981, p19).

As Sandra McPherson notes in her 1977 article, "The Swastika Poems," Heyen employs several strategies for approaching the Holocaust. One is by tone, and a second is by the enumeration of the Nazi crimes. Words and phrases are often repeated in a poem but the most important unifying factor is his original imagery (McPherson, p31).

Colour imagery, for example, permeates the poems. Blue is used as a motif to symbolise not only Jewish suffering, but the Nordic myth, and the mystery behind the Holocaust. A multiplicity of meanings to an image is characteristic of Heyen. In "Darkness" blue is introduced. The theme is the Holocaust's receding in the collective memory and the increasing likelihood that Hitler is still alive or that similar evil exists. It considers atrocity and time:

> Thirty, fifty, eighty years later
> it's getting darker.
> The books read, the testimonies all taken,
> the films seen through the eye's black lens,
> darker. The words
> remember: Treblinka green,
> Nordhausen red,
> Auschwitz blue, Mauthausen
> orange, Belsen white--
> colours considered
> before those places named themselves...

Blue reemerges several pages later and is the core of a poem of that title. It is based on an account by Elie Wiesel of a truckload of burning babies. The poem shows that Heyen considers God and the Holocaust equally impenetrable and that he considers them in the same context:

Blue

To witness, to
enter this
essence, this
silence, this
blue, colour
of sky, wreaths
of smoke, bodies
of children blue
in their nets
of veins: a lorry
draws up at the pit
under the blue sky where
wreaths rise. These
are the children's bodies, this
our earth. Blue. A lorry
draws up at the pit
where children smoulder. The sky
deepens into blue, its
meditation, a blue
flame, the children
smoulder. Lord of blue,
blue chest and blue brain,
a lorry of murdered children
draws up at the pit. This
happens, Your
sign, children
flaming in their rags, children
of bone-smoulder, scroll
of wreaths on your blue
bottomless sky, children
rising wreathed
to your blue lips.

This is the only poem the left margin of which forms a wavering line: the poem is shaped like smoke. The physical shape smoke assumes is as difficult to define as the reason for the Holocaust which literally and etymologically entailed smoke and fire. The ambiguity of *blue* here suggests the intangible quality of smoke and the mystery of the Holocaust. It is also of interest that God's appearance in the poem is difficult to locate since Heyen drops the capital "y" in "your" after the first use.

The meaning of blue is also multiple in "This Night," a poem published several years later in My Holocaust Songs. It opens "Which is our star this night?" and closes, "Which was our star this night?" Between the first and last lines is a meditation on blue and Belsen. It continues:

> Belsen is bathed in blue,
> every footworn lane, every
> strand of wire, pale blue.
> The guards' bodies,
> the prisoners' bodies--
> ...
> Which eyes are yours,
> which are mine? Even
> blue-eyed crows
> drift overhead.
> Even blue-eyed words
> sip dew from the weeping leaves.

Blue signifies the victims, the guards, the crows, worms-- man and nature, and most importantly, the speaker's quest for a reason for the existence of places such as Belsen. This is thematically prefigured in an earlier poem, "Two Walks," in The Swastika Poems. The first part, referring to the stars, opens:

> *One of them is yours*, my father said
> ....
> *It's exactly overhead*,
> and always will be...
> ...I saw it burning near
> (planet born when I was born), and blue.

Part two switches suddenly to a description of Bergen-Belsen. The leap from the stars to Belsen may seem startling, but within the context of later poems, it is a logical jump. The combination of the star and colour imagery here suggests that the speaker is destined to consider the Holocaust, and this is borne out by the fact that so many later poems are on the subject. This poem becomes even more meaningful when taken in context of others and attests to the unity in Heyen's imagery.

Some poems, however, employ an ironic tone to convey very serious themes. Through the combination of three & four strong stresses per line,

the four line stanza, A,B,C,B and word repetition, "Riddle," also from The Swastika Poems, reads like a child's rhyme. It is a well-structured poem with the last stanza echoing the first:

> From Belsen a crate of gold teeth,
> from Dachau a mountain of shoes,
> from Auschwitz a lampshade.
> Who killed the Jews?

and,

> The stars will remember the gold,
> the sun will remember the shoes,
> the moon will remember the skin.
> But who killed the Jews?

As in poems by Plath, Rich and Kumin, the signs of death here acquire what might be thought of as mythological significance; and as in their poems, childlike statements convey terrible facts that defy sophisticated sociological or psychological analysis. "Dark in the Reich of the Blood," in My Holocaust Songs is a second poem which has a riddle-like quality through the rhyme and frequent end-rhyme repetition. However, most of Heyen's poetry resists the temptation to universalise the Holocaust, and instead includes the enumeration of the Nazi war crimes. In "I Dream of Justice" in the first book, in end-stopped parallel lines the speaker says for example, "You who are poor, take back your coins. / You who are Jews, take back your teeth. / You who are shorn, take back your hair." Similarly, in parallel and in mainly end-stopped lines, atrocities are recited in "Simple Truths' in the same book.

The Trains, Heyen's final volume, is simpler and shorter than the previous works. It ends on a riddle-like poem, "The Trains," which imitates the actual rhythm of the sound of boxcars and the psychic rhythm of the facts. Two middle stanzas, further enumerating the Nazi atrocities in an almost documentary style, read:

> 248 freight cars of clothing,
> 400,000 gold watches
> 25 freight cars of women's hair.
> Some clothing was kept, some pulped for paper.
> Most of the finest watches were never melted down.
> All the women's hair was used for mattresses, or dolls (p21).

Through awareness of and sensitivity to the many difficulties associated with poetry of the Holocaust, Heyen manages, with few exceptions, to resist the temptation to universalise and genuinely addresses the Holocaust itself, as both historical fact and as a source for haunting, powerful poetry. Quite deservedly, he is praised by Gloria Young for writing poetry which is "restrained, documentary, anguished" (in Friedman, p557). His moral and aesthetic accomplishment should serve, in my view, as a model for others to emulate, and marks one of the most successful instances of the use of Holocaust in American poetry.

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Like the imagists, antiromantic and antisentimental, the objectivists wrote a poetry of the eye. This is especially true of Reznikoff's work. For Reznikoff, according to Michael Heller,

> the poem attains to the conditions of the photograph rather than the lyric-- the moment rescued from time. In Reznikoff, the uttered image is something other than a symbol; it becomes a kind of window framing actual particularities and occasions, realised so authentically that they resonate with enormous life of associations beyond the image's frame (Heller, p47).

The emphasis in objectivist poetry is upon the objects the poem describes, and the poem itself is treated like an object. The poet's ego and opinions recede behind the poem. In Reznikoff's poetry on life in New York City, the Jews in Babylonia and the Nazi death camps, there is no obvious authorial intervention. Reznikoff has argued that the objectivist poet "does not write directly about his feelings about what he sees and hears;...[he] is restricted almost to the testimony of a witness in a court of law, and...expresses his feelings indirectly by the selection of his subject matter" (Dembo, p194). Indeed, unlike Heyen, Reznikoff's authorial voice is so far from the hearing range of his readers that it forces them to confront the atrocities on their own terms.

Sharing a heavy emphasis on trial testimony, Reznikoff's poetry is outwardly similar to The Investigation by Weiss, which has been mentioned previously and criticised by Langer and Ezrahi for being too factual and documentary. Langer finds that "the result is not a new aesthetic distance, but an aesthetic *indifference*, a failure of the artist's imagination to seduce the spectator into a feeling of complicity with the material of his drama" (Langer 1975, p31). This is echoed by Ezrahi, who finds that the fatal flaw of Weiss's play is the removal of "the emotions with which the testimonies were delivered by the witnesses" (Ezrahi, p38).

However, unlike Weiss, while Reznikoff commits himself to these testimonies as his source, he does not surrender the emotional and moral authority with which they were delivered to austere factuality, and does not sacrifice the witnesses' humanity to a naive gesture toward the 'neutral'

documentation of historical or political events. His very selection of these events is rhetorically determined and precludes any possibility of neutrality.

In the introduction to By the Well of Living and Seeing: New and Selected Poems, Seamus Cooney argues that Reznikoff succeeds not only in keeping his own views out of the poetry but also in rousing the reader from a sentimental stupor. "There is such a disinterested quieting of the ego," argues Cooney "such an openness to experience, such quickness of emotional response without either inflation or (usually) sentimentality, that one comes away from reading his work not merely charmed and revived but-- almost without one's having noticed it--edified" (Reznikoff 1976, p21). Although, up until a few years before his death, Reznikoff did not receive much attention, most recent critics have been laudatory and have mentioned some of the qualities Cooney notes (Franciosi, p245).

They also agree that, in addition to Reznikoff's interest in objectivism, two biographical factors contributed to his objective approach in poetry. One was his expertise in law and the other his work in Jewish textual exegesis. In the exegesis the reader studies a Jewish text and other interpretations of it, and then justifies his own interpretation based on evidence from the text. Although he did not practise law, his knowledge of it was well exercised during his years as a legal researcher for an encyclopedia on the law. In the poems, like a lawyer, Reznikoff sifts through facts, presents them to his readers, and encourages the readers to reach their own conclusions based on the evidence. Reznikoff himself indicates the impact which styding law had on his approach to poetry. In a long autobiographical poem, Early History of a Writer he says,

> I saw that I could use the expensive machinery that had cost me four years of hard work at law....
>
> I, too, could scrutinise every word and phrase as if in a document of the opinion of a judge and listen, as well, for tones and overtones, leaving only the pithy, the necessary, the clear and plain (p135).

In Holocaust, Reznikoff draws his material entirely from legal transcriptions, the United States government publication Trials of the Criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunal, and the records of the

Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. This approach is similar to his earlier Testimony: The United States, a three-volume work on family violence which was based on American trial records from 1885-1890.

Although Holocaust employs a simple unembellished language, it is perhaps more effective vehicle for portraying the Holocaust than Heyen's Swastika Poems because the author's presence is not perceptible. All the reader sees are the bare facts of Nazi brutality and Jewish suffering. He or she is confronted by testimony after testimony of inmates and guards, based on actual trial records. Although the witness's account is occasionally clarified by a brief historical account, this is spoken by a colourless, toneless narrator. The reader does not have the insulation of the author's already assimilated presentation of the material, but must bear the complete burden of the facts.

The reader is not told who the witnesses are or anything about them. One witness says, for example,

> A number of Jews had to drink sea water only
> to find out how long they could stand it.
> In their torment
> they threw themselves on the mops and rags
> used by the hospital attendants
> and sucked the dirty water out of them (p153).

Another witness declares that when a group of Jewish women were lined up to be shot, one of the guards, impressed by one woman's beauty, told her to walk away implying that she was free and then shot her in the back. Still another witness describes the mass graves and the gruesome details:

> One grave would remain open for new corpses
> coming all the time;
> a truck would bring the bodies, still warm,
> to be thrown into the grave--
> naked as Adam and Eve-- (p156).

Occasionally, the cause of a simile or the mention of a particular detail makes the reader aware of the poet's presence. In general, Reznikoff's restraint and understatement make the poems devastating. It is remarkable that a poet devoted to Jewish history and the Jewish people

could detach himself from his subject as much as he appears to do in Holocaust. By means of this restraint, the book is effective because the poet does not offer the reader a cathartic release, even though the book portrays the Warsaw Uprising and the liberation of the camps. Reznikoff's readers are left with little more than the facts, and must reach their own intellectual conclusions and their own emotional equilibrium.

However, although the factuality of Reznikoff's poetry would appear to avoid most of the difficulties of Holocaust literature and indeed be praised for its testimonial characteristics, not all critics are satisfied. The singularity of the Holocaust within history not only imposes numerous aesthetic and moral constraints upon the author, but also allows for extreme and often contradictory positions to be held among the critics. Although many poets are criticised for taking too much imaginative licence, Ezrahi criticises Reznikoff for exactly the opposite reason, arguing that it is the very pretence of factuality that precludes imaginative transformation of events (Franciosi, p243). In the same vein, Langer writes "History provides the details-- then abruptly stops. Literature seeks ways of exploring the implications and making them imaginatively available" (Langer 1975, p9).

Ezrahi, however, goes even further and questions Reznikoff's use of the legal frame itself. Courtroom protocol might seem "to provide a kind of decorum to defy or reform the criminal order to the concentrationary system," she says, but when applied to the "systematic lawlessness of Auschwitz" it becomes "a mockery of the pretence of justice," and:

> In the absence of any visible editorial hand, whatever irony is brought to bear on the notion that the legal procedure can contain or avenge the horrors of genocide must be read into the text. The condensed presentation of bare facts, the terse, forensic language give equal weight on the written page to the testimony for Jew and Nazi and assign a kind of anonymity to both sides as they appear as witnesses for the prosecution of the defense, for the victim or the victimiser--as two facets, that is, of the human condition (Ezrahi, p36-37).

In the face of such an argument, one might be moved to discount Ezrahi, and to a lesser extent Langer, as a minority and rather extremist opinion; their demands upon Reznikoff's poetry are diametrically opposed to those of Alexander, Rosenfeld, Alvarez, Adorno, Wiesel or Steiner. Furthermore, arguing from the opposite extreme, some critics have praised Reznikoff for the power of his barren and objective poetry (Franciosi, p245).

As a poet as extreme in factual presentation of the Holocaust in poetry as Plath is extreme in metaphorical presentation, it is understandable that Reznikoff has provoked some criticism, however contradictory. A more valid source for criticism, in my opinion, concerns the aesthetics of Reznikoff's poetry rather than the morality. It must be considered whether, in his poetry, Reznikoff provides an imaginative response at all, or is rather characterised as "unimaginative" and "boring" as was The Investigation by Ezrahi. Langer further argues that the literature written specifically on the Holocaust is virtually doomed to fail. In vigorous opposition to Adorno and Steiner, he argues that "some qualities of the fantastic, whether stylistic or descriptive," are essential (Langer 1975, p43). Although through extremes of distance and documentary Reznikoff avoids serious problems on moral grounds, his poetry fails aesthetically. Perhaps the somewhat more significant authorial intervention displayed by Heyen is necessary to maintain a moral component and develop an aesthetic complexity in the poetry. An examination of Reznikoff's poetry is instructive, however, as an example of one final, extreme solution in an author's struggle to reconcile atrocity and art, as well as an example of the significant, complex and sometimes contradictory restrictions imposed when the atrocity in question is, or is couched in terms of, the Holocaust.

21. Conclusion

The human imagination, and poetry in particular, has been uniquely affected by the Holocaust. In examining the emergence of Holocaust poetry in America and its differences from poetry written after the first World War, some characteristics of the Holocaust's impact were examined, including a new poetic landscape, and an altered world-view.

What is particularly notable about the Holocaust as a literary subject is the number and nature of ethical and aesthetic pitfalls it contains for the writer who seeks to incorporate it imaginatively. Snodgrass, at one extreme, offends the reader with a histrionic and often insensitive flaunting of graphic Holocaust references. Reznikoff, at the other extreme, preserves the Holocaust's integrity but fails to transform it imaginatively with his dry recounting of facts and testimony. Plath, Sexton and Kumin write aesthetically pleasing poetry which to various degrees trivialises the Holocaust by using it as a metaphor for personal ends. Brock and Berg's poetry suffers aesthetically from their exploration of the new poetic landscape provided to them by the Holocaust. These poets have been unable to achieve or maintain the delicate balance demanded by the Holocaust between the aesthetic and the ethical, the historical and the imaginative, the Holocaust itself and the particular focus of the poem. Of those who were more successful in establishing a balance, Levertov and Rich have incorporated the Holocaust into their poetry while forwarding a political agenda, a usage which the more conservative critics would still find morally objectionable. Finally Heyen, keenly aware of the moral responsibilities he feels are central to writing Holocaust poetry, has managed to produce powerful and haunting poetry focusing on the Holocaust directly and successfully balancing its awkward aesthetic and ethical demands, a poetry which may be said to appear true to both the reality of the Holocaust and the inability to express it.

However, what has become clear upon tracing the development of and departures in American Holocaust poetry is that the critical views expressed are as difficult to evaluate as the body of poetry itself. This event is further unique among literary subjects because it involves such a bewildering, ultimately insoluble proliferation of diametrically opposed criteria and standards for critical evaluation. Of the major critics discussed in this dissertation, these viewpoints have ranged from the extreme aesthetic (Sontag) to the extreme moralist (Wiesel, Adorno, Steiner and Alvarez), or via Rosenfeld, who insists on some intrinsic relation between the two.

However, to ignore ethical considerations entirely would be to deny the Holocaust's uneasy place within history; to adopt too stringent ethical criteria would preclude virtually all of the poetry so far considered. Ezrahi and Langer have considerably modified standpoints, but ones which would still rule out many of the creative responses we have considered. In my opinion, like Heyen among the poets, it is James Young who, of the critics considered, adopts the most balanced critical stance, one by which the impact of the Holocaust upon American poetry can most effectively be evaluated.

A more general question raised by this poetry, though somewhat beyond the scope of this study, concerns the relationship between art and atrocity, and between the Holocaust and history. Firstly, the Holocaust affords the historian and literary critic the opportunity to trace the slow development of reactions to a singular atrocity from silent shock into intellectual dialogue, gradual incorporation into literature, and now almost common currency in imaginative and even commercial landscapes. Secondly, although after a cathartic silence such migration of the Holocaust into metaphor and incorporation into literature might seem inevitable (and even surprisingly delayed), in the unique case of the Holocaust such a transformation is not always seen as desirable. In this case, as Stewart Florsheim observes, introducing his anthology of this most difficult poetry,

> Here it is history that precedes the poetry. And it is a history heretofore undreamed of, and it stands as an overwhelming force not only greater than, but indifferent to, literature. The very function, the very value, of literature is called into question (p17).

However, given the relatively recent incorporation of the Holocaust into American poetry, it is too early to tell whether the Holocaust has become a permanent trope in the American poetic imagination and whether, in its evaluation, the unique ethical and aesthetic considerations involved will remain so highly charged. Although, as James Young argued, the Holocaust undoubtedly has become a referent to which all further suffering has been compared, it may nonetheless be true that, as Langer believes,

with the passage of time Auschwitz and Treblinka will slowly be incorporated into "mere place names" of history. This process is presently being accelerated, as Friedman, Rosenfeld, Postman and Ezrahi argued, by the Holocaust's widespread assimilation into literature, particularly through such poetry as written by Plath and Snodgrass. The place of the Holocaust, within both history and poetry, will continue to develop and must be further considered with the passing of time.

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