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Writing History, Writing Trauma (review)

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and to some extent already has—become a precedent in our time. Bauer's book contains more flaws than Hilberg's, especially where the issue of explicability is concerned, but the moral intentions that inspire *Rethinking the Holocaust* are not among them.

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***Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), viii + 226 pp., cloth \$42.20, pbk. \$18.95.**

Dominick LaCapra's insightful and compassionate *Writing History, Writing Trauma* concerns the interpretation of historical traumas such as the Holocaust and the traumas' enduring effects. LaCapra both uses and transcends contemporary critical theory in assessing the influence of trauma on present-day historical writing. Specialists conversant with the concepts of postmodern literary theory will read this work with great ease. However it will also reward nonspecialists who make the extra effort to understand the author.

Among the issues explored by LaCapra is the distinction between two approaches to historiography: the documentary research model and the radical constructivist model. In the documentary model, the historian seeks to establish objective facts from archival sources and other primary documents in order to show what "really happened" in the past.<sup>1</sup> In radical constructivism, referential statements that make objective-truth claims apply "at best" only to events and are of marginal significance. Instead, the primary focus is on the aesthetic, ideological, and political factors that "construct" the narratives in which referential statements are embedded (p. 1). Moreover, while radical constructivists acknowledge a distinction between history and fiction with regard to actual events, they nevertheless see an "identity or essential similarity" between history and fiction at the structural level (p. 8). A central thrust of LaCapra's book is that the relativism implicit in this position can have unacceptable implications, especially for the representation of traumatic historical events. When radicals claim that historical representation consists of little more than the historian's distinctive political or ideological distortions, the gates open both to Holocaust denial and to the ascription of sublimity to some of the most destructive historical events.

LaCapra is especially critical of Hayden White, who asserts that the "middle voice" is the only mode of representation appropriate to the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> In the middle voice, action rather than the subject or object is emphasized. LaCapra argues that its use can obliterate the distinction between perpetrator and victim.<sup>3</sup> Following Jean-Paul Sartre in *Nausea*, White holds that life is simply a congeries of experiences that are transformed into a meaningful story only when narrated retrospectively. In view of the various ways experiences can be organized retrospectively, no definite criteria exist by which one narrative may be privileged. Given the logic of White's position, Holocaust history can be told in many ways, some of them quite vicious. Nevertheless,

White concedes that in the case of the Third Reich, we are “eminently justified” in eliminating a “comic” or “pastoral” story from the list of “competing narratives.”<sup>4</sup> And LaCapra does not reject entirely use of the middle voice. He suggests that it might be appropriate for Primo Levi’s “grey zone,” in which victims were forced to become oppressors, as did members of the Judenräte or figures such as Tadeusz Borowski.

Like White, LaCapra regards the objectivity of third-person referential statements as unsuitable for historical narratives concerning extreme trauma. He argues that such events require the historian’s “empathic unsettlement,” a mode of writing that blurs the binary distinction between historian and victim (p. xi). Such distinctions are inappropriate in part because of the persistent aftereffects of traumatic events. Traumas are not discrete occurrences that happen once and for all; they are seldom, if ever, completely mastered.

In the case of unmastered trauma, the victim is often “haunted” by the original event and caught up in its compulsive repetition. LaCapra holds that there are two fundamental forms of remembering traumatic events: “acting out” and “working through.” The author takes these concepts from psychoanalysis and attempts to develop their usefulness for historical studies. He argues that the response of the historian-observer to events that are “charged with emotion and value” is likely to involve “transference,” or “the tendency to repeat or reenact performatively in one’s own discourse or relations processes active in the object of study” (p. 36). Clearly, the Holocaust is such an “object of study” (pp. 141–42).

Moreover, no absolute distinction exists between acting out and working through. In acting out, one compulsively relives the traumatic event(s) of the past in the present. Loyalty to deceased family members or friends, for example, can sometimes prevent survivors and their offspring from moving beyond repetition. Moreover, a “negative sublimity” may at times be ascribed to traumatic events, giving rise to what the author describes as “founding traumas” that in turn can become the intensely cathected basis of individual or group identity.

LaCapra regards working through as a process in which a person seeks to gain “critical distance on a problem” (pp. 143–44). Working through is never complete, but it does enable the individual, whether victim or secondary observer, to distinguish between the experience that overwhelmed him/her and his/her present life. Such a person is never wholly trapped in the past. In discussing acting out and working through, LaCapra tells of a class session during which his students viewed survivor video testimonials. He reports that the students identified with the survivors and could not watch for more than an hour, during which their anxiety level increased because they identified with the experience of helpless victims and the survivors’ inability to do anything about their plight. These responses raise the question of the role of empathy in historical understanding. LaCapra acknowledges that empathy is difficult to control, but claims that “desirable empathy” involves empathic unsettlement as a “necessary affective response” to trauma (p. xi). While the effect of empathic unsettlement on histori-

cal writing cannot be reduced to a formula, it does pose a barrier to “closure in discourse” and renders questionable inappropriate harmonizing and “spiritually uplifting” accounts of traumatic events (p. 41).

Distinguishing absence from loss is especially important to LaCapra, and it presupposes the further distinction between structural and historical trauma. Structural trauma is experienced as the absence of an original condition of perfect harmony, which is represented in religio-mythical terms in the biblical tradition of the Fall. A more dangerous example is the myth of an original, perfectly unified community, such as the *Volks-gemeinschaft*. A common strategy employed to mitigate the anxiety generated by structural trauma is to transform absence into loss and anxiety into fear. One then seeks to expel or destroy individuals or groups alleged to be radically “other” and, as such, the cause of the lost harmony. In the case of both Nazi Germany and Christendom, that role was assigned primarily to the Jews. For LaCapra, the appropriate response to absence is working through that leads to the distinction between absence and loss on the one hand, and an understanding of the real nature of pseudo-solutions such as scapegoating.

I would like to offer a somewhat different perspective on the issue of objectivity and historical writing. In an earlier work, I counseled readers “to adopt a mental attitude that excludes all feelings of sympathy or hostility towards both the victims and the perpetrators.”<sup>5</sup> That advice was not offered out of indifference to the victims’ plight. I was motivated by two fundamental considerations: the potential fascination that Nazi horror might hold for some readers and the continuing power of what I politely identified as the “ambivalent reactions” Jews and Judaism have historically aroused in Christendom.<sup>6</sup> LaCapra argues that traditional religious belief no longer seems plausible after Auschwitz (p. 154). That may be true at the level of manifest belief,<sup>7</sup> but at the level of pretheoretical consciousness, religion may continue to exercise powerful influence in ways that are opaque to critical scrutiny. For example, in a recent essay a prominent Protestant theologian referred to the “Jew” as “the absolute other,” a characterization that has the potential for the kind of destructive scapegoating described by LaCapra.<sup>8</sup> Nor is this author alone among his peers. When I counseled strict objectivity, I was not convinced that I could rely upon the empathy of my readers for an understanding of the Holocaust. LaCapra’s commitment to “empathic understanding” presupposes the existence of men and women of good will. Today, they exist in significant number, but who can tell whether their number will increase or diminish under conditions of radical political and social stress?

## Notes

1. The great German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) classically articulated this understanding of the historian’s task. In his preface to *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations from 1494 to 1514*, Ranke expresses his commitment to strict objectivity and lists as his sources “memoirs, diaries, letters, diplomatic reports, and original narratives of eyewitnesses.” See the excerpt from von Ranke in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 57.

2. Hayden White, "Historical Employment and the Story of the Truth," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* Saul Friedländer, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 37–53, cited in LaCapra, *Writing History*, p. 16.
3. LaCapra observes that "Modern languages do not have a middle voice in grammar but may at best allow for a discursive analogue of it." *Writing History*, p. 19.
4. White, "Historical Employment," p. 40, cited in LaCapra, *Writing History*, p. 18.
5. Richard L. Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History: Mass Death and the American Future* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 6.
6. Ibid.
7. I have challenged the traditional religious attempt to see the governance of divinity in human history. See Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
8. See Thomas J. J. Altizer, "God as Holy Nothingness," in *What Kind of God? Essays in Honor of Richard L. Rubenstein*, Betty Rogers Rubenstein and Michael Berenbaum, eds. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), pp. 347–56.

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***The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth*, Stefan Maechler (New York: Schocken, 2001), ix + 496 pp., \$16.95.**

The scandal of Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* is generally known. First published in German in 1995, the book appeared in English in 1996. Its immediate success launched its author into a giddy round of readings, interviews, lectures, and honors. Yet even before publication the German publisher, Suhrkamp, had been advised not to release the work. After speaking with Wilkomirski and insisting on an ill-fated "Afterword," Suhrkamp head Siegfried Unseld directed the company's subsidiary Jüdischer Verlag to go ahead and publish the book. Doubts about the memoir's veracity soon were voiced publicly, however, culminating in an angry 1998 denunciation by the Swiss writer Daniel Ganzfried, who called the book a hoax and its author a liar. Wilkomirski, claimed Ganzfried, was not a Jewish survivor but rather Bruno Grosjean, a Swiss gentile who as a child had been adopted by a physician, Kurt Dössekker, and his wife, Martha. For a while opinions were split. Suhrkamp initially stood by Wilkomirski and, for the most part, resisted demands that the book be withdrawn from the market. Others joined Ganzfried and called for a full explanation from the beleaguered author, who continued to insist that he was indeed Benjamin Wilkomirski and that his book was genuine. Lengthy articles in the summer of 1999 in the *New Yorker* (by Philip Gourevitch) and *Granta* (by Elena Lappin) added weight to Ganzfried's assertions. A complete revelation was still lacking, however, and Wilkomirski continued to insist that he was a Jewish survivor, and that *Fragments* was a truthful account of his childhood.