The Modernist Event

*History does not break down into stories but into images.*
—Walter Benjamin

*The coming extinction of art is prefigured in the increasing impossibility of representing historical events.*
—Theodor Adorno

It is a commonplace of contemporary criticism that modernist literature and, by extension, modernist art in general dissolves the trinity of event, character, and plot which still provided the staple both of the nineteenth-century realist novel and of that historiography from which nineteenth-century literature derived its model of realism. But the tendency of modernist literature to dissolve the event has especially important implications for understanding the ways in which contemporary Western culture construes the relationship between literature and history. Modern historical research and writing could get by without the notions of character and plot, as the invention of a subjectless and plotless historiography in the twentieth century has amply demonstrated.1 But the dissolution of the event as a basic unit of temporal occurrence and building block of history undermines the very concept of factuality and threatens therewith the distinction between realistic and merely imaginary discourse. The dissolution of the event undermines a founding presupposition of Western realism: the opposition between fact and fiction. Modernism resolves the problems posed by tradi-
tional realism, namely, how to represent reality realistically, by simply aban-
donning the ground on which realism is construed in terms of an opposition between fact and fiction. The denial of the reality of the event undermines the very notion of fact informing traditional realism. Therewith, the taboo against mixing fact with fiction except in manifestly imaginative discourse is abolished. And, as current critical opinion suggests, the very notion of fiction is set aside in the conceptualization of literature as a mode of writing which abandons both the referential and poetic functions of language use.

It is this aspect of modernism that informs the creation of the new genres of postmodernist parahistorical representation, in both written and visual form, called variously docudrama, faction, infotainment, the fiction of fact, historical metafiction, and the like. These genres are represented by books such as Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, Mailer’s *Executioner’s Song*, Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, Thomas’s *White Hotel*, De Lillo’s *Libra*, and Reed’s *Flight to Canada*; the television versions of *Holocaust* and *Roots*; films such as *The Night Porter* (Cavani), *The Damned* (Visconti), *Hitler: A Film from Germany* (Syberberg), *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Tavernier), and, more recently, Oliver Stone’s *JFK* and Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*. All deal with historical phenomena, and all of them appear to fictionalize, to a greater or lesser degree, the historical events and characters that serve as their referents in history.

These works, however, differ crucially from those of their generic prototype, the nineteenth-century historical novel. That genre was born of the inscription within and interference between an imaginary tale of romance and a set of real historical events. The interference had the effect of endowing the imaginary events with the concreteness of reality while at the same time endowing the historical events with the magical aura peculiar to the romance. However, the relationship between the historical novel and its projected readership was mediated by a distinctive contract: its intended effects depended upon the presumed capacity of the reader to distinguish between real and imaginary events, between fact and fiction, and therefore between life and literature. Without this capacity, the affect in which the familiar (the reader’s own reveries) was rendered exotic while the exotic (the historical past or the lives of the great) was rendered familiar could not have been produced.

What happens in the postmodernist docudrama or historical metafiction is not so much the reversal of this relationship (such that real events are given the marks of imaginary ones while imaginary events are endowed with reality) as the placing in abeyance of the distinction between the real
and the imaginary. Everything is presented as if it were of the same ontological order, both real and imaginary—realistically imaginary or imaginarily real, with the result that the referential function of the images of events is etiolated. Thus, the contract that originally mediated the relationship between the nineteenth-century (bourgeois?) reader and the author of the historical novel has been dissolved. And what you get, as Gertrude Himmelfarb tells us, is “history as you like it,” representations of history in which anything goes—to the detriment of both truth and moral responsibility, in her view. It is exactly the sort of thing of which Oliver Stone has been so often accused since the appearance of *JFK* (1991).

Stone was criticized by journalists, historians, politicians, and political pundits for his treatment of the events surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. In part, this was a result of the “content” of his film. He was accused, among other things, of fostering paranoia by suggesting that President Kennedy’s assassination was a result of a conspiracy involving highly placed persons in the United States government. But also—and for some critics even more seriously—Stone’s film seemed to blur the distinction between fact and fiction by treating a historical event as if there were no limits on what could legitimately be said about it, and thereby bringing under question the very principle of objectivity on the basis of which one might discriminate between truth, on the one side, and myth, ideology, illusion, and lie, on the other.

Thus, in a review of *JFK* that appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* entitled “Movie Madness?” Richard Grenier wrote:

And so Oliver Stone romps through the assassination of John Kennedy, inventing evidence that supports his thesis [of conspiracy], suppressing all evidence that conflicts with it, directing his film in a pummelling style, a left to the jaw, a right to the solar plexus, flashing forward, flashing backward, crosscutting relentlessly, shooting “in tight” (in close), blurring, obfuscating, bludgeoning the viewer until Stone wins, he hopes, by a TKO.

Note that Grenier objects to the ways in which Stone slants evidence concerning the assassination, but he is especially offended by the form of Stone’s presentation, his “pummelling” and “bludgeoning” style, which apparently distorts even those events whose occurrence can be established on the basis of historical evidence. This style is treated as if it were a violation of the spectator’s powers of perception.

So, too, another film critic, David Armstrong, was as much irked by
the form as he was by the content of Stone’s movie. He excoriated what he called Stone’s “appropriation of TV car commercial quick-cutting” and reported that, for him, “watching JFK was like watching three hours of MTV without the music.” But Armstrong disliked “the film as a film” for other reasons as well, reasons more moral than artistic. “I am troubled, . . . by Stone’s mix’n’match of recreated scenes and archival footage,” because “young viewers to whom [Stone] dedicates the film could take his far-reaching conjectures as literal truth.” Armstrong suggests, then, that Stone’s editing techniques might destroy the capacity of young viewers to distinguish between a real and a merely imaginary event. All of the events depicted in the film—whether attested by historical evidence, based on conjecture, or simply made up in order to help the plot along or to lend credence to Stone’s paranoid fantasies—are presented as if they were equally historical, which is to say, equally real, or as if they had really happened. And this in spite of the fact that Stone is on record as professing not to know the difference between history and something that people make up, in other words, as viewing all events as equally imaginary, at least insofar as they are represented events.

Issues such as these arise within the context of the experience, memory, or awareness of events that not only could not possibly have occurred before the twentieth century but whose nature, scope, and implications no prior age could even have imagined. Some of these events—such as the two world wars, a growth in world population hitherto unimaginable, poverty and hunger on a scale never before experienced, pollution of the ecosphere by nuclear explosions and the indiscriminate disposal of contaminants, programs of genocide undertaken by societies utilizing scientific technology and rationalized procedures of governance and warfare (of which the German genocide of six million European Jews is paradigmatic)—function in the consciousness of certain social groups exactly as infantile traumas are conceived to function in the psyche of neurotic individuals. This means that they cannot be simply forgotten and put out of mind or, conversely, adequately remembered, which is to say, clearly and unambiguously identified as to their meaning and contextualized in the group memory in such a way as to reduce the shadow they cast over the group’s capacities to go into its present and envision a future free of their debilitating effects.

The suggestion that, for the groups most immediately affected by or fixated upon these events, their meanings remain ambiguous and their consignment to the past difficult to effectuate should not be taken to imply in any way that such events never happened. On the contrary, not only are
their occurrences amply attested, but also, their continuing effects on current societies and generations that had no direct experience of them are readily documentable. But among those effects must be listed the difficulty felt by present generations of arriving at some agreement as to their meaning—by which I mean what the facts established about such events can possibly tell us about the nature of our own current social and cultural endowment and what attitude we ought to take with respect to them as we make plans for our own future. In other words, what is at issue here is not the facts of the matter regarding such events but the different possible meanings that such facts can be construed as bearing.

The distinction between facts and meanings is usually taken to be a basis of historical relativism. This is because, in conventional historical inquiry, the facts established about a specific event are taken to be the meaning of that event. Facts are supposed to provide the basis for arbitrating among the variety of different meanings that different groups can assign to an event for different ideological or political reasons. But the facts are a function of the meaning assigned to events, not some primitive data that determine what meanings an event can have. It is the anomalous nature of modernist events— their resistance to inherited categories and conventions for assigning meanings to events—that undermine not only the status of facts in relation to events but also the status of the event in general.

But to consider the issue of historical objectivity in terms of an opposition of real to imaginary events, on which the opposition of fact to fiction is in turn based, obscures an important development in Western culture which distinguishes modernism in the arts from all previous forms of realism. Indeed, it seems as difficult to conceive of a treatment of historical reality that would not use fictional techniques in the representation of events as it is to conceive of a serious fiction that did not in some way or at some level make claims about the nature and meaning of history. And this for a number of quite obvious reasons. First, the twentieth century is marked by the occurrence of certain “holocaustal” events (two world wars, the Great Depression, nuclear weapons and communications technology, the population explosion, the mutilation of the zoosphere, famine, genocide as a policy consciously undertaken by “modernized” regimes, etc.) that bear little similarity to what earlier historians conventionally took as their objects of study and do not, therefore, lend themselves to understanding by the commonsensical techniques utilized in conventional historical inquiry nor even to representation by the techniques of writing typically favored by historians from Herodotus to Arthur Schlesinger. Nor does any
of several varieties of quantitative analysis, of the kind practiced in the social sciences, capture the novelty of such events. Moreover, these kinds of event do not lend themselves to explanation in terms of the categories underwritten by traditional humanistic historiography, which features the activity of human agents conceived to be in some way fully conscious and morally responsible for their actions and capable of discriminating clearly between the causes of historical events and their effects over the long as well as the short run in relatively commonsensical ways — in other words, agents who are presumed to understand history in much the same way as professional historians do.

But beyond that, the historical event, by which one used to mean something like “the assassination of the thirty-fifth president of the United States,” has been dissolved as an object of a respectably scientific knowledge. Such events can serve as the contents of bodies of information; but as possible objects of a knowledge of history that might lay claim to the status of scientific lore, they are of interest only as elements of a statistical series. Indeed, such singular events as the assassination of a head of state are worthy of study only as a hypothetical presupposition necessary to the constitution of a documentary record whose inconsistencies, contradictions, gaps, and distortions of the event presumed to be their common referent itself moves to the fore as the principal object of investigation. As for such singular events of the past, the only thing that can be said about them is that they occurred at particular times and places.

An event such as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy will inevitably continue to generate the interest of history buffs and even of professional historians as long as it can be made to seem relevant to current concerns, political, ideological, or group- or individual-psychological, as the case may be. However, any attempt to provide an objective account of the event, either by breaking it up into a mass of its details or by setting it within its context, must conjure with two circumstances: one is that the number of details identifiable in any singular event is potentially infinite; and the other is that the context of any singular event is infinitely extensive or at least is not objectively determinable. Moreover, the historical event, traditionally conceived as an event that was not only observable but also observed, is by definition an event that is no longer observable, and hence it cannot serve as an object of a knowledge as certain as that about present events that can still be observed. This is why it is perfectly respectable to fall back upon the time-honored tradition of representing such singular events as the assassination of the thirty-fifth president of the United States as a
story and to try to explain it by narrativizing (fabulating) it—as Oliver Stone did in *JFK*.13

But this is where the distinction between the fact as against the event of modernism must be addressed. The notion of the historical event has undergone radical transformation as a result of the occurrence in our century of events of a scope, scale, and depth unimaginable by earlier historians and the dismantling of the concept of the event as an object of a specifically scientific kind of knowledge. So too, however, for the notion of the story; it has suffered tremendous fraying and at least potential dissolution as a result of that revolution in representational practices known as cultural modernism14 and the technologies of representation made possible by the electronic revolution.

On this last point, we can consider profitably the power of the modern media to represent events in such a way as to render them not only impervious to every effort to explain them but also resistant to any attempt to represent them in a story form. The modern electronic media can manipulate recorded images so as literally to explode events before the eyes of viewers. The uses made in courtroom presentations of television images of Los Angeles police beating a black man (Rodney King) had the effect of making this seemingly unambiguously documented event virtually unintelligible as an event. The very precision and detail of the imagistic representation of the event are what threw it open to a wide variety of interpretations of “what was really going on” in the scene depicted. The contingency of the videographic recording of the event (the videographer happened to be within sight of the scene with camcorder available, loaded, functioning, etc.) precluded the fiction that the events recorded followed a specific scenario, script, or plot line. It is no accident, as it used to be said, that accidents have traditionally served as the very archetype of what historians formerly thought of as events, but the accidents in question were always of a certain kind, namely, the sort that yielded to the imperatives of storytelling and followed the rules of narrativization.

But not only are modern postindustrial accidents more incomprehensible than anything earlier generations could possibly have imagined (think of Chernobyl), but the photo and video documentation of such accidents is so full that it is difficult to work them up as elements of a single objective story. Moreover, in many instances, the documentation of such events is so manipulable as to discourage the effort to derive explanations of the occurrences of which the documentation is supposed to be a recorded image. “It is no accident,” then, that discussions of the modernist event tend in the
direction of an aesthetics of the sublime-and-the-disgusting rather than that of the beautiful-and-the-ugly.

An example of what I have in mind is provided by an article in the periodical 1-800. Here Michael Turits analyzed the hermeneutic gymnastics inspired by media coverage of two amply documented techno-air disasters: the collision of three Italian MB 339A (Frecce tricolori) jet planes in an air show over Ramstein, Germany, in August 1988, killing 50 and injuring 360; and the explosion in 1986 of the NASA Challenger space shuttle, just after lift-off in full view of a live audience and millions of television viewers. In his analysis of the media’s presentations of these events, Turits likens the impact of their endless re-presentations on TV to the ambiguating effects of those televised replays of crucial events in sporting contests. Turits observes that, “when the [Challenger] blew up and the Frecce tricolori collided, . . . the optical geometries yielded by endless replays far outran the capacities of the network techno-refs to make a call.” What had been promised as a clarification of what happened actually produced widespread cognitive disorientation, not to say a despair at ever being able to identify the elements of the events in order to render possible an objective analysis of their causes and consequences. Thus, Turits notes:

Like an out-of-control computer virus somehow lodged in the network’s video editing desks, the Ramstein collision and the Challenger explosion could do nothing but frantically play themselves over and over. . . . The frame-by-frame re-runs that followed [the Challenger explosion] for months served the same purpose as the media’s obsession with the deep-sea recovery of the shuttle and astronaut remains — to reconstruct the too brief event as a visually intelligible accident.

The networks played the tapes of the Challenger explosion over and over. In response to the question of why they had done so, the news commentator Tom Brokaw said: “What else could we do? People wanted answers.”15 But, as Turits remarks, the tapes certainly provided no answers. All that the “morphing” technology used to re-present the event provided was a sense of its evanescence. It appeared impossible to tell any single authoritative story about what really happened — which meant that one could tell any number of possible stories about it.

And this is why the issues raised in the controversy over JFK could be profitably set within a more recent phase of the debate over the relation of historical fact to fiction peculiar to the discussion of the relation between
modernism and postmodernism. For literary (and, for that matter, filmic) modernism (whatever else it may be) marks the end of storytelling—understood in Walter Benjamin’s sense of “the tale” by which the lore, wisdom, and commonplaces of a culture are transmitted from one generation to another in the form of the followable story. After modernism, when it comes to the task of storytelling, whether in historical or in literary writing, the traditional techniques of narration become unusable—except in parody. Modernist literary practice effectively explodes the notion of those characters who had formerly served as the subjects of stories or at least as representatives of possible perspectives on the events of the story; and it resists the temptation to emplot events and the actions of the characters so as to produce the meaning-effect derived by demonstrating how one’s end may be contained in one’s beginning. Modernism thereby effects what Fredric Jameson calls the derealization of the event itself. And it does this by consistently voiding the event of its traditional narrativistic function of indexing the irruption of fate, destiny, grace, fortune, providence, and even of history itself into a life (or at least into some lives) “in order to pull the sting of novelty” and give the life thus affected at worst a semblance of pattern and at best an actual, transocial, and transhistorical significance.

Jameson shows how Sartre, in a typically modernist work like Nausea, thematizes the experience of time as a series of instants that either fail to take on the form of a story or fall apart into sherds and fragments of existence. The thematization takes the form of a representation of the ineradicable differences—indeed, the opposition—between ordinary life and a putatively adventurous one. Thus, in a scene analyzed by Jameson, the protagonist Roquentin reflects to himself:

I have never had adventures. Things have happened to me, events, incidents, anything you like. But no adventures. . . . I had imagined that at certain times my life could take on a rare and precious quality. There was no need for extraordinary circumstances: all I asked for was a little precision. . . . From time to time, for example, when they play music in the cafés, I look back and tell myself: in the old days, in London, Meknes, Tokyo, I have known great moments, I have had adventures. Now I am deprived of this. I have suddenly learned, without any apparent reason, that I have been lying to myself for ten years. And naturally, everything they tell about in books can happen in real life, but not in the same way. It is to this way of happening that I clung so tightly. (53–55)
Roquentin’s problem is that, to him, in order for an event to have the meaning of an adventure, it would have to resemble the kinds of event met with in adventure stories. Events would have to be narratable. Here is how Sartre represents Roquentin’s desire for story-events:

This is what I thought: for the most banal event to become an adventure, you must (and this is enough) begin to recount it. This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives somehow surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story.

But you have to choose: live or tell.

Roquentin’s melancholy stems from his realization that:

Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come and go out, that’s all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition. . . . That’s living. But everything changes when you tell about life; it’s a change no one notices: the proof is that people talk about true stories. As if there could possibly be true stories; things happen one way and we tell about them in the opposite sense. You seem to start at the beginning: “It was a fine autumn evening in 1922. I was a notary’s clerk in Marommes.” And in reality you have started at the end. It was there, invisible and present, it is the one which gives to words the pomp and value of a beginning. . . . I wanted the moments of my life to follow and offer themselves like those of a life remembered [as in Proust!]. You might as well try to catch time by the tail. (56–58 passim; my emphases)

And this realization leads him to conclude:

This feeling of adventure definitely does not come from events: I have proved it. It’s rather the way in which the moments are linked together. I think this is what happens: you suddenly feel time is passing, that each instant leads to another, this one to another one, and so on; that each instant is annihilated, and that it isn’t worth while to hold it back, etc., etc. And then you attribute this property to events which appear to you in the instants: what belongs to the form you carry over to the content. You talk a lot about this amazing flow of time but you hardly see it. . . . (79; my emphasis)

If I remember correctly, they call that the irreversibility of time. The feel-
The meaning of adventure would simply be that of the irreversibility of time. But why don’t we always have it? Is it that time is not always irreversible? There are moments when you have the impression that you can do what you want, go forward or backward, that it has no importance; and then other times when you might say that the links have been tightened and, in that case, it’s not a question of missing your turn because you could never start again. (80)

These passages from Sartre today seem dated, melodramatic, even hackneyed—as the recent past always does—but they usefully point up the bases of a distinctively modernist apprehension that the meaning, form, or coherence of events, whether real or imaginary ones, is a function of their narrativization. Jameson concludes that the modernist derealization of the event amounts to a rejection of the historicity of all events and that this is what throws the modernist sensibility open to the attractions of myth (the myths of Oedipus, Ulysses, Finnegan, and so on) or the extravagances of melodrama (typically institutionalized in the genre of the detective, spy, crime, or extraterrestrial alien story). In the former case, the meaning of otherwise unimaginable events is seen to reside in their resemblance to timeless archetypal stories—like the death of the young hero-leader, JFK. In the latter case, meaning is rendered spectral, seeming to consist solely in the spatial dispersion of the phenomena that had originally seemed to have converged only in order to indicate the occurrence of an event.

Sartre’s treatment of the event is a representation (Vorstellung) of a thought about it, rather than a presentation (Darstellung) of the event itself. A typically modernist presentation of the event is found in a passage from Virginia Woolf’s last novel, Between the Acts. The title itself indicates a typical concern of high modernism, namely, an interest in what, if anything, goes on in the intervals between those rare instants in our lives in which something eventful seems to be happening. But the story thematizes the insubstantiality not only of the intervals between events but also of those events whose seeming occurrence renders possible the apprehension of what comes between them as an interval.

In Between the Acts, the life of the Oliver family seems to be as orderly as the pageant that is to be performed by the villagers on the family estate on that single “day in June in 1939” which frames the nonaction of the story. The pageant is depicted, however, as differing from the real world by its possession of a discernible plot; its intervals mark the acts which themselves represent identifiable periods of English history from the Middle Ages to the present. In the intervals between the acts of the pageant, the members of
the Oliver family and their guests disperse and recombine in moments of what always turn out to be failed epiphanies, so that in reality the events that might have served to mark out a plot in their lives never quite occur. What happens “between the acts” is nothing at all, indeed the difference between the acts and the intervals between them is progressively smudged and finally erased. The principal difference we are left with is that between the pageant, with all its acts marked by events, and the real life of the spectators, in which no events whatsoever occur. An eventful instant of time would have been one that would have collected and condensed the vagrant events that are experienced more as intervals than as occurrences and endowed them with pattern and cohesion, if only for a moment. But there are no such events in this story. All of the events that take place before, during, between, and after the acts of the pageant itself are shown to have been as insubstantial as what takes place between the individual frames of a movie film and as fictitious as those historical events depicted in the pageant.

The passage I referred to as exemplifying the typically modernist approach to the representation of an event appears in the second scene of the story (there are no chapter designations). The central figure of the novel, Isabella (Mrs. Giles) Oliver, has just entered the library of the family house, located “in a remote village in the very heart of England,” on the morning of the pageant. Her father-in-law, Bart Oliver, a retired civil servant, is already there, reading the newspaper. As she enters, she recalls a phrase uttered by a woman visitor to the library some years earlier.

“The library’s always the nicest room in the house,” she quoted, and ran her eyes along the books. “The mirror of the soul,” books were... . . . The Fairie Queene and Kinglake’s Crimea; Keats and The Kreutzer Sonata. There they were, reflecting. What? What remedy was there for her at her age—the age of the century, thirty-nine—in books? Book-shy she was, like the rest of her generation; and gun-shy, too. Yet as a person with a raging tooth runs her eye in a chemist shop over green bottles with gilt scrolls on them lest one of them may contain a cure, she considered: Keats and Shelley; Yeats and Donne. Or perhaps not a poem; a life. The life of Garibaldi. The life of Lord Palmerston. Or perhaps not a person’s life; a county’s. The Antiquities of Durham; The Proceedings of the Archaeological Society of Nottingham. Or not a life at all, but science—Eddington, Darwin, Jeans.

None of them stopped her toothache. For her generation the newspaper was a book; and, as her father-in-law dropped the Times, she took it and read: “A horse with a green tail... .” which was fantastic. Next, “The guard at
Whitehall . . .” which was romantic and then, building word upon word, she read: “The troopers told her the horse had a green tail; but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown upon a bed. Then one of the troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face . . .”

That was real; so real that on the mahogany door panels she saw the Arch in Whitehall; through the Arch the barrack room; in the barrack room the bed, and on the bed the girl was screaming and hitting him about the face, when the door (for in fact it was a door) opened and in came Mrs. Swithin carrying a hammer.

She advanced, sidling, as if the floor were fluid under her shabby garden shoes, and, advancing, pursed her lips and smiled, sidelong, at her brother. Not a word passed between them as she went to the cupboard in the corner and replaced the hammer, which she had taken without asking leave; together—she unclosed her fist—with a handful of nails. (19–20)

Notice that quite a few (and for the most part mundane) events are registered here: Isabella peruses the bookshelves for a possible remedy for the ills that afflict her generation — significantly marked by a date: 1939. She considers poetry, biography, history, science and turns away from them all, to the newspaper where she reads an account of an event, a rape, an event so surreal that she sees it “on the . . . panels” of the library door. But the image of the event, which happened in the past, metamorphoses, without a break in grammar or syntax, into that of Mrs. Swithin, Bart’s sister, entering the library in the fictive present: and “on the bed the girl was screaming and hitting him about the face, when the door (for in fact it was a door) opened and in came Mrs. Swithin carrying a hammer.”

The image of the girl being raped leaks into that of the quite ordinary event of Mrs. Swithin entering the library and contaminates it, endowing it with a sinister, phantasmagoric aspect: Mrs. Swithin “advanced, sidling, as if the floor were fluid under her shabby garden shoes, and, advancing, pursed her lips and smiled, sidelong, at her brother. Not a word passed between them as she went to the cupboard in the corner and replaced the hammer, which she had taken without asking leave; together—she unclosed her fist—with a handful of nails” (my emphases). The two events, the rape of the girl and the entrance of Mrs. Swithin into the library, are endowed with an equal measure of significance or, rather, of ambiguity of meaning. There is no way of distinguishing between their respective phenomenal aspects or their different significances. Both events flow out of their outlines. And
flow out of the narrative as well. The effect of the representation is to endow all events with spectral qualities. Mrs. Swithin’s replacement of the hammer leads to an exchange between herself and her brother which Isabella recognizes—uncannily—as having taken place every summer for the last seven years.

Every summer, for seven summers now, Isa had heard the same words; about the hammer and the nails; the pageant and the weather. Every year they said, would it be wet or fine; and every year it was—one or the other. The same chime [of the clock] followed the same chime, only this year beneath the chime she heard: “The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer.” (22)

The outside of events, their phenomenal aspects, and their insides, their possible meanings or significances, have been collapsed and fused. The meaning of events remains indistinguishable from their occurrence, but their occurrence is unstable, fluid, phantasmagoric—as phantasmagoric as the slow motion, reverse angle, zoom, and rerun of the video representations of the Challenger explosion. This is not to say that such events are not representable, only that techniques of representation somewhat different from those developed at the height of artistic realism may be called for.

Contemporary discussions of the ethics and aesthetics of representing the Holocaust of the European Jews—what I take to be the paradigmatic modernist event in Western European history—provide insights into the modernist view of the relationship between history and fiction. With respect to the question of how most responsibly to represent the Holocaust, the most extreme position is not that of the so-called revisionists, who deny that this event ever happened; but, rather, that of those who hold that this event is of such a kind as to escape the grasp of any language even to describe it and of any medium—verbal, visual, oral, or gestural—to represent it, much less of any merely historical account adequately to explain it. This position is represented in George Steiner’s oft quoted remark, “The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason.” Or that of the philosopher Emile Fackenheim: “The Holocaust . . . resists explanation—the historical kind that seeks causes, and the theological kind that seeks meaning and purpose. . . . The Holocaust, it would appear, is a qualitatively unique event, different in kind even from other instances of genocide. One cannot comprehend [the Holocaust] but only confront and object.”
The historian Christopher R. Browning addresses questions and assertions such as these in a remarkably subtle reflection on the difficulties he had to face in his efforts to reconstruct, represent, and explain a massacre of some 1,500 Jews — women, children, elders, and young men — by German Army Reserve Battalion 101 on 13 July 1942 in the woods outside the Polish village of Jozefów. Browning has spent years pondering the documents that attest to the facts of this event and interviewed 125 members of the battalion who, neither regular soldiers nor members of the SS, took on the role of professional killers in the course of their service as anonymous executors of the genocidal policy conceived and implemented by their Nazi leaders. Browning’s aim was to write the history of one day in the life of the “little men” who were the perpetrators of specific crimes against specific people at a specific time and place in a past that is rapidly receding from living memory and passing into history. And in his report on his research, Browning asks:

Can the history of such men ever be written? Not just the social, organizational, and institutional history of the units they belonged to. And not just the ideological and decision-making history of the policies they carried out. Can one recapture the experiential history of these killers — the choices they faced, the emotions they felt, the coping mechanisms they employed, the changes they underwent?23

He concludes that such an “experiential history” of this event, all too typical of all too many events of the Holocaust, is virtually impossible to conceive. The Holocaust, he reminds us, “was not an abstraction. It was a real event in which more than five million Jews were murdered, most in a manner so violent and on a scale so vast that historians and others trying to write about these events have experienced nothing in their personal lives that remotely compares.” And he goes on to assert that “historians of the Holocaust, in short, know nothing — in an experiential sense — about their subject.” This kind of “experiential shortcoming,” Browning points out, “is quite different from their not having experienced, for example, the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia or Caesar’s conquest of Gaul. Indeed, a recurring theme of witnesses [to the Holocaust] is how ‘unbelievable’ [that event] was to them even as they lived through it.”24

The shortcoming in question pertains to the nature of the events under scrutiny; these events seem to resist the traditional historian’s effort at the kind of empathy which would permit one to see them, as it were,
from the inside, in this case, from the perpetrators’ perspective. And the difficulty, Browning argues, is not methodological. It is a question not of establishing the facts of the matter but of representing the events established as facts in such a way as to make those events believable to readers who have no more experience of such events than the historian himself.

Browning, in short, draws back from suggesting what appears to me to be the obvious conclusion one might derive from this problem. Which is that the problem is indeed not one of method but, rather, one of representation and that this problem, that of representing the events of the Holocaust, requires the full exploitation of modernist as well as premodernist artistic techniques for its resolution. He draws back from this possibility because, like Saul Friedlander and other experts in the study of representations of the Holocaust, whether in writing, film, photography, monuments, or anything else, he fears the effects of any aestheticization of this event. And especially by making it into the subject matter of a narrative, a story that, by its possible “humanization” of the perpetrators, might enable the event — render it fit therefore for investment by fantasies of intactness, wholeness, and health which the very occurrence of the event denies.

According to Eric Santner, the danger of yielding to the impulse to tell the story of the Holocaust — and, by extension, any other traumatic event — opens the investigator of it to the danger of “narrative fetishism,” which is, on his view, a “strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere.” In short, the threat posed by the representation of such events as the Holocaust, the Nazi Final Solution, the assassination of a charismatic leader such as Kennedy or Martin Luther King or Gandhi, an event, such as the destruction of the Challenger, which had been symbolically orchestrated to represent the aspirations of a whole community, this threat is nothing other than that of turning them into the subject matter of a narrative. Telling a story, however truthful, about such traumatic events might very well provide a kind of intellectual mastery of the anxiety that memory of their occurrence may incite in an individual or a community. But precisely insofar as the story is identifiable as a story, it can provide no lasting psychic mastery of such events.

And this is why it seems to me that the kinds of antinarrative nonstories produced by literary modernism offer the only prospect for adequate representations of the kind of “unnatural” events — including the Holocaust — that mark our era and distinguish it absolutely from all of the history that has come before it. In other words, what Jameson calls the psycho-
pathologies of modernist writings and film, which he lists as “their artificial closures, the blockage of narrative, [their] deformation and formal compensations, the dissociation or splitting of narrative functions, including the repression of certain of them, and so forth,”—it is these very psychopathological techniques, which explode the conventions of the traditional tale (the passing of which was lamented and at the same time justified by Benjamin in his famous essay “The Storyteller”), that offer the possibility of representing such traumatic events as those produced by the monstrous growth and expansion of technological modernity (of which Nazism and the Holocaust are manifestations) in a manner less fetishizing than any traditional representation of them would necessarily be.

What I am suggesting is that the stylistic innovations of modernism, born as they were of an effort to come to terms with the anticipated loss of the peculiar sense of history which modernism is ritually criticized for not possessing, may provide better instruments for representing modernist events (and premodernist events in which we have a typically modernist interest) than the storytelling techniques traditionally utilized by historians for the representation of the events of the past that are supposed to be crucial to the development of their communities’ identity. Modernist techniques of representation provide the possibility of defetishizing both events and the fantasy accounts of them which deny the threat they pose in the very process of pretending to represent them realistically and clear the way for that process of mourning which alone can relieve the burden of history and make a more if not totally realistic perception of current problems possible.

It is fortunate, therefore, that we have in the work of one of the greatest of modernist writers a theorization of this problem of representing events in the narrative. In four lectures entitled Narration, delivered at the University of Chicago in 1936, Gertrude Stein reflected on the unreality of the event in contrast to “things which have really existed.” An event, she suggested, was only an “outside without an inside,” whereas a thing that has existed has its outside inside itself. When “the outside is outside,” she said, “it is not begun and when it is outside it is not ended and when it is neither begun nor ended it is not either a thing which has existed it is simply an event.” She went on to contrast both journalistic and historical treatments of events with a specifically modernist artistic treatment of them, on the basis of the failure of the former kind to put “the outside inside.”

In real life that is if you like in the newspapers which are not real life but real life with the reality left out, the reality being the inside and the newspapers
being the outside and never is the outside inside and never is the inside
outside except in the rare and peculiar cases when the outside breaks through
to be inside because the outside is so part of some inside that even a descrip-
tion of the outside cannot completely relieve the outside of the inside.

And so in the newspapers you like to know the answer in crime stories in
reading crime and in written crime stories knowing the answer spoils it. After
all in the written thing the answer is a let down from the interest and that is so
every time that is what spoils most crime stories unless another mystery crops
up during the crime and that mystery remains.

And then there is another very peculiar thing in the newspaper thing it is
the crime in the story it is the detective that is the thing.

Now do you begin to see the difference between the inside and the outside.

In the newspaper thing it is the crime it is the criminal that is interesting,
in the story it is the story about the crime that is interesting. (59)

As for historical representation, she has this to say:

Anyone can see that there is more confusion that is to say perhaps not more
confusion but that it is a more difficult thing to write history to make it
anything than to make anything that is anything be anything because in
history you have everything, you have the newspapers and the conversations
and letter writing and the mystery stories and audience and in every direction
an audience that fits anything in every way in which an audience can fit itself
to be anything, and there is of course as I have been saying so much to trouble
any one about any one of any of these things. (54)

It was, Stein argued—or rather poetized—because of the specifically
modern awareness of the exteriority of events that their narrative treatment
was so difficult.

We talked a great deal all this time how hard it is to tell anything anything that
has been anything that is, and that makes a narrative and that makes history
and that makes literature and is history literary.

Well how far have we come.

Can history be literature when it has such a burden a burden of everything,
a burden of so many days which are days one after the other and each has its
happening and still as in the newspaper what can make it matter it is is not
happening to-day, the best thing that can happen about that happening is
that it can happen again. And that makes the comfort of history to a historian
that history repeats itself, that is really the only comfort that a historian can have from anything happening and really and truly it does not happen again not as it used to happen again because now we know really know so much that has happened that really we do not know that what has happened does not happen again and so that for poor comfort has been taken away from the historian.

What I mean is this, history has gotten to be so that anybody can if they go on know that everything that happened is what happened and as it all did happen it is a very serious thing that so much was happening. Very well then. What would be the addition to anything if everything is happening, look out of any window, any window nowadays is on a high building if it happens right and see what is happening. Well enough said, it is not necessary to go on with recognition, but soon you do know anybody can know, that it is all real enough. It is all real enough, not only real enough but and that is where it is such a difficult thing not real enough for writing, real enough for seeing, almost real enough for remembering but remembering in itself is not really an important enough thing to really need recalling, insofar as it is not seeing, but remembering is seeing and so anything is an important enough thing for seeing but it is not an important enough thing for writing, it is an important enough thing for talking but not an important enough thing for telling.

That is really the trouble with what history is, it is important enough for seeing but not important enough for writing, it is important enough for talking but not important enough for telling. And that is what makes everybody so troubled about it all about what history is, because after all it ought to be important enough for telling for writing and not only important enough for talking and seeing, it really ought to be, it really ought to be, but can it be. Cannot it really be. (59)

Now the same thing is true when the newspaper tells about any real thing, the real thing having happened it is completed and being completed can not be remembered because the thing in its essence being completed can not be remembered because the thing in its essence being completed there is no emotion in remembering it, it is a fact like any other and having been done it is for the purposes of memory a thing having no vitality. While anything which is a relief and in a made up situation as it gets more and more exciting when the exciting rises to being really exciting then it is a relief then it is a thing that has emotion when that thing is a remembered thing.

Now you must see how true this is about the crime story and the actual crime. The actual crime is a crime that is a fact and it having been done that in
itself is a completion and so for purposes of memory with very rare exceptions where a personality connected with it is overpowering there is no memory to bother any one. Completion is completion, a thing done is a thing done so it has in it no quality of ending or beginning. Therefore in real life it is the crime and as the newspaper has to feel about it as if it were in the act of seeing or doing it, they cannot really take on detecting they can only take on the crime, they cannot take on anything that takes on beginning and ending and in the detecting end of detective stories there is nothing but going on beginning and ending. Anybody does naturally feel that that a detective is just that that it is a continuity of beginning and ending and reality nothing but that. (42)

I will resist the impulse to comment on this passage since it is composed in such a way as to collapse the distinction between its form and its semantic content on which the possibility of commentary pretending to clarify what the passage “means” is based. But as I was first revising this essay, the newspapers were filled with accounts of another “trial of the century,” in this case, preliminary hearings in the case of a famous African American athlete and movie personality, O. J. Simpson, suspected of brutally murdering his (white) wife (mother of his two children) and her male companion (a male model and aspiring actor, white and Jewish). These court proceedings were themselves preceded by a bizarre incident in which Simpson, apparently contemplating escape from the country, led police on a slow-moving “chase” on the freeways of Los Angeles to the accompaniment of television cameras, nationwide radio and TV coverage, and the same kind of commentary as that which attended the explosion of the Challenger or the very athletic events in which Simpson had made his fortune. Few events of such notoriety have been so amply documented as this chase, which featured live spectators who had rushed to the route of the flight to cheer Simpson, thereby being transformed into actors in the scene by the television camera’s eye.

What is the inside and what the outside of this event? What the beginning and what the end? Although the trial of Simpson was intended to determine the specific role played by him in the commission of the crime of double murder, it is evident that this trial was another event rather than a continuation of the event that occasioned it. Interestingly, the prosecuting attorneys announced that they would not seek the death penalty for Simpson if he were convicted of the crime, indicating that, given the American public’s affection for this hero, any effort to seek the death penalty would
prejudice the possibility of a jury’s convicting him. The crime-event was already being detached from the trial-event, almost as if to suggest that they belonged to different universes of occurrence. In fact, the trial had the purpose of providing a scenario compatible with a commonplace of the discourse of justice, namely, that everyone is equal under the law but that the law of the rich and famous is one thing and that of the poor and obscure quite another.