CHAPTER TWO

From Buchenwald to Harlem: The Holocaust Universe of
The Pawnbroker

Edward Lewis Wallant’s 1961 novel, *The Pawnbroker*, is a prototypical American Holocaust novel, establishing what have since become the standard devices of American Holocaust fiction. Wallant successfully moved the Holocaust from the shadowy realm of symbolism and allusion to the foreground of fiction, presenting it as a major component of theme, narrative, and character construct and making it the central focus of his survivor-protagonist’s consciousness and experience. Similarly, his use of a survivor-chorus and the evocation of the Holocaust era through voluntary and spontaneous recollection and dream have become the primary means of Holocaust recreation in American fiction. The novel’s structural pattern consists of a series of dramatic dichotomies: Holocaust-era Europe and America of the late fifties; Holocaust and post-Holocaust conditions of a specific survivor; and the juxtaposition of Holocaust survivors with American ghetto dwellers. This contrapuntal arrangement sharply clarifies and focuses the raw Holocaust experience, one which remains incomprehensible despite its centrality to twentieth-century life.
The novel is set in ghetto Harlem and suburban Westchester in the summer of 1958, remote in place and time from Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen. Nevertheless, the survivor-protagonist, forty-five-year-old Sol Nazerman, still bears physical and psychological wounds suffered at the hands of the Nazis. His body is witness to nefarious concentration camp medical experimentation, "A piece of his pelvic bone missing, two of his ribs gone, and his collarbone slanted in weird misdirection." More complex are his psychological wounds, which are manifested in obsession with the past and alienation and withdrawal from contemporary relationships. A former professor at the University of Cracow and a devoted family man, Nazerman was deprived in Nazi-occupied Poland of everything that held meaning for him. To protect himself from further psychological pain he maintains an emotional barrier to keep people at a safe distance. He remains a man apart, reluctantly engaging in meaningful dialogue only when an antagonist provokes him. Although he still reads Checkov and Tolstoy, he generally denigrates his pre-Holocaust values and interests. He insists: "I do not trust God or politics or newspapers or music or art. I do not trust smiles or clothes or buildings or scenery. . . . But most of all, I do not trust people and their talk, for they have created hell with that talk" (P, 114–15).

That Nazerman's personal encounters are marred by the physical and psychological atrocities inflicted upon him in Europe appears in his rejection of those who would befriend him. Since Holocaust experience has taught him that the human bond may be arbitrarily sundered by a demonic external force, he passionately resists intimate connection with his current acquaintances: with his American relatives, with his mistress, with contemporary victims of American urban and economic blight, and with his fellow workers. Although Nazerman's temporal and physical location is New York City, his spiritual and metaphysical sphere is the Holocaust universe, his real associates the murdered Jews of Europe.

To convey the survivor's alienation, Wallant juxtaposes the pawnbroker's attitudes with those of his ghetto foil, social worker Marilyn Birchfield. Whereas Miss Birchfield persistently reaches out to Nazerman in genuine—albeit naive—friendship to resurrect the charitable spirit she perceives buried beneath the rubble of his European past, Nazerman resists and firmly demands privacy. It is through Wallant's sharp contrast of these Harlem outsiders—detached survivor-immigrant and engaged American do-gooder—
that we understand the severity of Nazerman’s alienation. Marilyn Birchfield, reared in New England Protestant security, is, as her name implies, safely rooted in her native land and culture. As a social worker, she came to New York City to help disadvantaged youth, to touch the lives of others. Conversely, the uprooted European Jew came to be among strangers, to survive in a land that would allow him to live in peace. Whereas Birchfield strives to be of the community, Nazerman is content to have the solitude of the pawnbroker’s wire cage. Particularly difficult for the social worker is Nazerman’s antipathy toward the people who patronize his shop. Although Miss Birchfield grants the survivor “a great deal of sadness and grief” (P, 145), she is intolerant of his bitterness, thus evidencing her American innocence. Without enumerating the horrors of his past, Nazerman rebukes the self-righteous American and warns her that she will encounter the unbearable should she probe into Holocaust reality.

People who have ‘suffered’ in your little world may or may not become bitter, depending, perhaps, on the state of their digestive system or whether they were weaned too early in infancy.... There is a world so different in scale that its emotions bear no resemblance to yours; it has emotions so different in degree that they have become a different species! (P, 146)

For Nazerman, Europe is a vast graveyard, where he witnessed one of the West’s most civilized nations “Not at its worst,” as some would say, but according to its victims “as it really is” (P, 210).

Juxtaposition of pre- and postHolocaust immigrants, contrast of those who sought economic opportunity with those who sought refuge from the hell of concentration and death camps, is Wallant’s astute means of distinguishing the survivor-protagonist from other immigrants and an important contribution to American fiction. As an obsessed Holocaust victim, Sol Nazerman is philosophically and psychologically alienated from his bourgeois sister who escaped the European catastrophe by prewar emigration. Whereas Bertha came to America in 1928 in search of economic advancement and assimilation to the good life and can, therefore, reject postwar perpetuation of Holocaust trauma, Sol cannot dismiss the past because it is his present and will be his future. Free of her brother’s history, Bertha concentrates on being an American. Her greatest satisfactions come from material acquisitions and the deluded con-
viction that her family has shed its Jewishness in favor of the American suburban ideal. Insensitive to the magnitude of her brother's plight, she would have him forget past degradations of the camps and get on with American prosperity. Sol's woeful presence is a grotesque contradiction of Bertha's carefully structured façade of well-being and conspicuous consumption.

In addition to distinguishing the Holocaust survivor from other immigrants, Wallant further enriches Nazerman's portrait by comparison with three other survivors: Tessie Rubin, Sol's mistress; Mendel Solowitz, Tessie's ailing father; and Mr. Goberman, a collector of funds for Jewish relief work. The survivor community acts as a Greek chorus whose comments and behavior provide a gauge by which to measure the protagonist. The survivor chorus has since become a literary model for other Holocaust novelists and is seen in the work of Saul Bellow and Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, among others.

The Holocaust experiences and sensibilities of Mendel Solowitz and Tessie Rubin echo and supplement Sol's history of physical and psychological suffering. Mendel's body, which prompts his physician to remark that he should have been dead many years ago, testifies to the torture he sustained, just as Sol's body shows how he was deformed in Nazi medical experimentation programs. Further, Mendel's Holocaust-induced gallows wit corresponds to Sol's bitter harangues. In agony, on his deathbed Mendel greets his benefactor ironically—"it's a Jew—gas him, burn him, stick him through with hot needles" (P, 61)—intimating the emotional scars he and Sol still share.

Instead of love, Sol and his mistress share a legacy of loss. Both are bereft of marriage partner and children, both harbor memories and visions of the murder of their loved ones. However, in contrast to Sol's Holocaust-wrought emotional withdrawal and bitter assertiveness, is Tessie's down-trodden docile passivity. A perpetual victim, her life is a series of Holocaust recollections and disabilities. As she ministers to her sick father, Tessie is haunted by Bergen-Belsen memories. The only relief she allows herself is rationalization that the dead are better off than the living. Since both Tessie and Sol are consumed by grief—one expresses it while the other suppresses it—their own relationship is void of joy, and is but a mere biological coupling of automatons. While this dispassionate union confirms Sol's emotional isolation, it sheds additional light on his character as a charitable human being. Although he fails as
passionate and sensitive lover, he succeeds as compassionate financial benefactor and discerning defender of two weaker victims.

Central to the success of Wallant's survivor portraits is his ability to resist maudlin and saintly characters, and to present instead a gallery of complex human beings whose diversity suggests variations of survival. In addition to the complex and abrasive Nazerman, he designs a brilliant cameo portrait of a guilt-ridden survivor, Mr. Goberman. The least sympathetic of the survivor community, Goberman is a haunting, aggressive beggar, a professional refugee who assuages his own guilt by devoting his time to Jewish survival efforts. He plays on survivors' guilt, insisting that Holocaust survivors are themselves perpetually obliged to save threatened Jewish lives in tribute to their own escape from annihilation.

A pathetic figure, Goberman has become so deranged by his concentration camp experience that he hurls accusations and insults at the victims of Nazi crime rather than indict the perpetrators of the crime. In a grotesque parody of justice, Goberman confuses Holocaust survivors with their oppressors, demanding that the victims expiate their sin of outliving fellow Jewish Holocaust victims by helping Jews in current peril. He chides: "Their blood is on you. You must give me money for the Jewish Appeal or your name will go down with Hitler in Hell" (P, 89). In an effort to assuage his own guilt, Goberman capitalizes on the guilt and fear of others. An insidious pest, he threatens to reappear "like the Angel of Death to the Egyptians" (P, 89), not to avenge the enemies of the Jews but to plague the Jews themselves.

Not only does Nazerman reject Goberman's macabre inversion of innocence and guilt, but he implies that Goberman has no right to judge others. Goberman melodramatically bares his arm to show the familiar blue tattooed numbers and taunt the skeptic with his inventory of horrors.

Inside my heart is more credentials, too. Go get a knife from the kitchen and open me up. I'll show you the stab wounds, the burnt pieces from the murders of my wife, my five children, my mother, my sister. . . . I'll show you credentials printed in red, in BLOOD! You want more? Chop open my brain, see there the pictures of the walking dead, the raped, the disemboweled. (P, 122)

Whereas Tessie Rubin is moved by Goberman's agony, Sol listens to the harangue dispassionately because he recalls Goberman as the
dreaded concentration camp informer, a victim who collaborated with the Nazis in a desperate effort to assure his personal survival. Goberman’s vociferous denial of Sol’s charges lamentably intimates the awful probability of their truth:

Not my own family, never my own family. What kind of person would say a thing like that? Here, look at me, see how I collect money for the Jews, how I bleed for them all over the world. Day and night I try to get money for their salvation. I scream, I threaten, I sacrifice my self-respect to do for them. And this, this is my reward! No one can say to my face that I . . . never in a million years would I have done a thing like that to my immediate family. Do you think that I could sleep at night, . . . How could anyone? It is beyond imagining that such a person could walk the face of the earth . . . I . . . NEVER . . . SOLD . . . MY . . . OWN . . . FAMILY . . . NEVER NEVER NEVER NEVER! (P, 123–24)

Silent about his own Holocaust suffering, Sol disdains Goberman as “a professional sufferer, a practicing refugee” (P, 124), an opportunist eager to turn a profit on disaster. Because Sol’s personal degradation is free from the taint of betrayal of fellow victims, he is free from survivor guilt and urges Tessie to resist Goberman’s efforts to induce guilt. The Goberman cameo is a sensitive dramatization of one of the most painful truths of the Nazi era, recognition that subjection to atrocity can transform ordinary human beings into amoral automatons, the victim can become the victimizer.

Just as the Holocaust experience may have transformed Goberman into a collaborator and finally into a guilt-ridden mendicant, so it accounts for Nazerman’s ironic occupational metamorphosis from cultured professor to stereotypical pawnbroker. Claiming “A sense of kinship, of community with all the centuries of hand-rubbing Shylocks” (P, 8), the survivor of the world’s most successful anti-Semitic endeavor ironically brings to the New World the Old World’s anti-Jewish burden. Perversely spiteful is Nazerman’s grotesque adoption of the “much maligned calling,” the hateful role of moneylender long and ardently assigned to the Jew by Christian European religion, art, and politics. Nazerman’s assumption of the pawnbroker role is symbolic of his own regression and historic referent for the limitations nations have traditionally imposed upon the Jew, a method whereby the despised second-class citizen provides services that the nation’s favored cit-
izens refuse to render for themselves. It is through the survivor’s postwar, ironic assumption of the hated stereotype that the novelist plunges the reader into an imaginary Holocaust landscape.

August, the anniversary of the Nazerman family deaths and Sol’s season of discontent, is the testing time in which the survivor’s precarious armor of self-conscious indifference fails. Poignantly correlating the traditional month of lamentation in the Hebrew calendar with Nazerman’s time of personal grief, Wallant traces Sol’s August bereavement from midmonth to its awesome culmination on August 28. Sol’s current torment begins with “a deep, unlocalized ache, a pain that was no real pain yet but only the vague promise of suffering, like some barometrical instinct” (P, 55). The reader initially encounters Sol on a pleasant “rosy” morning as he walks to work feeling “the sensation of being clubbed” (P, 5). Midsummer warmth and joy fail to penetrate the Holocaust survivor’s inner chill and heartfelt despair. His vague feelings of discomfort then become objectified in the novel’s urban environment.

Harlem is the “objective correlative” of Nazerman’s fractured post-Holocaust existence. Wallant’s ghetto is both realistic and metaphorical, evoking the tormented mental state of a man remembering his brutalized family, a man in mourning for his slaughtered innocents. Dehumanizing and hostile aspects of the physical setting reflect the tormented protagonist’s anguish. Dark images of filth, disease, and pollution objectify the survivor’s weariness with life, his own sense of impending collapse. Paralleling the city’s physical deterioration are Nazerman’s physical manifestations of psychic malaise: “pressure in him, a feeling of something underneath, which caused the growing tremors on the surface of him” (P, 155). As the pawnbroker waits on the subway platform, his train approaches in a yellow beam of blinding light and thunderous roar, assaulting the passenger “like a projectile . . . rush[ing] to swallow him up” (P, 155). Stark, realistic urban imagery thus symbolizes Holocaust degradation and atrocity. The yellow light evokes offensive yellow identity badges; the city train suggests wartime boxcar transports carrying Jews to concentration camps and crematoria. Although the concentrationary world is repeatedly evoked by Harlem degradation, Nazerman’s thoughts center on the earlier humiliation and remain aloof from contemporary suffering. For Nazerman, the significance of present misery is its value as Holocaust referent.

Although Nazerman survived the evils of fascism and the
infamies of Hitler for American peace and quiet, he is still forced to witness victims and victimizers. The daily life of a pawnshop owner exposes Nazerman to an American underclass at the mercy of the powerful and the corrupt; it exposes him to the oppressed, the impotent, the cynical, the ineffectual innocents the defeated and complacent, the selfish and well-intentioned. Although Wallant juxtaposes Harlem ghetto and European concentration camp, he judiciously distinguishes between the attendant human debasement of the American ghetto experience and government-sponsored genocide in the German concentration camps. To suggest, as some critics do, that "the conditions of the camps are repeated and perpetuated" in the Harlem setting is unfortunate. German concentration camp and American ghetto are hardly analogous in magnitude and meaning. The Nazis and their collaborators intended to exterminate an entire people. American slum degradation, horrible and destructive as it is, does not represent an overt policy of genocide, as Auschwitz did. Although degree and kind of suffering are unequal, contemporary humiliation and pain precipitate Nazerman's free associations, nightmares, and spontaneous recollections of Holocaust horrors.

Representative of Wallant's skillful juxtaposition of Sol's past and present is his introduction of Mabel Wheatly, paramour of Sol's pawnshop assistant and local prostitute. Mabel activates Sol's memory of his own wife's imprisonment in a Nazi brothel barrack. As Mabel offers herself to Nazerman in an effort to finance her lover's business ambitions, memories of European dehumanization flood the survivor's consciousness. Sensitized by his wife's forced whoredom, Sol gives Mabel the money she would earn by the sale of her body, but he refuses to exploit her. A former victim, he refuses to victimize another, even a willing candidate. While Sol questions his assistant, Jesus Ortiz, about Mabel, he thinks of Ruth, his face, "lost in some nameless graveyard of thought" (P, 113). Although Sol tries to redirect his thinking, "to escape burial with things he had left behind forever," his face revealed graveyard horror, as at "something exhumed" (P, 113). Wallant's diction clearly suggests the ghastly living death of the Jewish women in the Nazi brothel barracks. Nazerman is so angered by his discovery that his silent business partner, Murillio, owns the brothel where Mabel works, that he resolves to extricate himself from a partnership with a man whom he now judges to be an agent of evil. Murillio's response to Sol's demand to be released from their busi-
ness arrangement is a symbolic death threat, administered by a henchman who forces the barrel of his pistol into Sol's mouth.

Nazerman's futile attempt to escape his troubles through sleep is foreshadowed as he drinks a nightcap from a ritual memorial glass. The thoughts he tries to repress in his waking hours intrude as a nightmare. He dreams of being forced to watch a black-uniformed SS officer compel Ruth Nazerman to commit fellatio. As the grieved, shamed husband tries to turn away from the sordid spectacle, he is repeatedly struck and made to endure his wife's humiliation. As Ruth's "mouth stretched in soundless agony" (P, 169), Sol cries out for both. The parallel is complete: as the professional prostitute evokes memories of Ruth's victimization, the symbolic fellatio links Harlem whoremaster with Nazi tyrant, and the present again evokes the past. In another sequence of the rape nightmare, in a Goberman-like inversion of innocence and guilt, Sol's anguish for his wife is replaced by his own anger. In this instance, as the guard forces him to witness his wife's defilement, he thinks: "How ugly, what a mockery of their love! Why did she do this to him? He felt like tearing at her horrid nakedness" (P, 224). The husband's impotence is dramatized in his paradoxical condemnation of the Jewish victim and his failure to denounce the Nazi villain. In a world turned upside down by Nazi values, the absurd is the real, and a tormented husband may condemn his wife for infidelity because the ruling power imposes whoredom on her.

In addition to rendering the survivor's troubled psyche, dream and involuntary recollection further serve as vehicles whereby the concentration camp universe may be brought to the forefront of the postwar setting. Structural and thematic unity are achieved as Wallant repeatedly uses these devices to demonstrate the survivor's continuing trauma and as effective methods of recreating the concentrationary universe. In each instance Wallant has astutely prepared for memory and dream with a causal link to contemporary misfortune, whether as an evocative pawnshop event or survivor referent. Despite the protagonist's efforts to repress his Holocaust experiences, they will not be put to rest and forcefully invade his consciousness, either as flashes of spontaneous recall or nightmare. The conscious will to repress the Holocaust is consistently overpowered by the subconscious will or need to confront the horror.

In addition to charting the enduring emotional impact of Holocaust trauma through dream, Wallant also uses the device to
outline Holocaust chronology: from the early stages of captivity in the boxcar transports, through the concentrationary experience, and the final destination at the crematoria. The setting of an early dream is the cattle-car transport of the Nazermans to Buchenwald. Amid the endless wailing of the crushed multitude, Sol's wife clings to their daughter who is pressed against her bosom, "held there without her arms, for the crush of the bodies held them all as in ice" (P, 38). Sol is incensed by his impotence to aid his children as they suffer the physical and psychological hardships of the long train journey through Poland. "His son David squealed with a rodent sound of helplessness somewhere down near Sol's leg. 'I'm slipping in it Daddy, in the dirty stuff. I can't stay up'" (P, 37). Pressed by two hundred other bodies, Sol is unable to save his son from falling into the excrement. The powerless parents can only watch as their son vomits and drowns in filth.

In one nightmare Sol recalls a Nazi object lesson for would-be escapees. Buchenwald inmates are forced to stand in the camp square and witness a crazed father, whose son had recently been gassed, being driven against a temporarily defused barbed-wire fence by guard dogs:

_For a few seconds the dogs fell back, surprised at the deceptive quarry which had seemed so small. Rubin was screaming, one shining red figure of blood, only his mouth definable in all the torn body, and that so vivid because it framed the scream... 

Suddenly Rubin turned and flung himself up on the thorny wire fence, where he clung just out of reach of the snapping dogs. One of the guards waved toward the guard tower. There came the rattly crack of electricity. The bloody figure went rigid, pulled away from the horrid life of the wires, and then seized it and pulled it tight in a lover's embrace. Then the body went limp. And the ragged bundle of blood and charred flesh, caught like some wind-tossed rubbish on the wires, was no longer Rubin or anything else._

(P, 100–101)

The crescendo of atrocities mounts as Nazerman's dreams multiply and appear an increasingly vivid detail. The dream that follows is about Sol's own disfigurement, just as savage though executed by German scientists and physicians rather than their trained attack dogs.

_He was flat on his back, staring at the glaring surgical lamp... He heard the sawing of bone, and he knew that it was his bone... Then there came the_
Vocal and thematic echoes unite and reverberate from one dream to the next. Sadistic pleasure taken from Jewish pain is evident first as the concentration camp guards joke and laugh at Rubin’s disorientation and then as the medical team finds humor in Nazerman’s subjection to surgical experimentation. A bond of sadism seems to join prison-guard mentality and that of the elite German medical community.

Tension resulting from the combination of the approaching anniversary of the Nazerman family slaughter and recent underworld threats on Sol’s life is manifested in the greater frequency and intensity of the victim’s nightmares. His postwar anxieties multiply. He dreams of “a mountain of emaciated bodies, hands and legs tossed in nightmare abandon, as though each victim had died in the midst of a frantic dance, and hollow eyes and gapping mouths expressing what could have been a demented and perverse ecstasy” (P, 197). Through a dream the reader learns that Nazerman’s camp job was loading corpses onto a pile in the crematorium, a job that filled him with shame. The degradation of such work was intensified by the horrible probability that he would recognize a familiar face, by the prospect of finding his wife and child in the mass of bodies. To cope with such labor, Sol averted his eyes from the heads of the corpses, seized “the dry, bone-filled limbs and heaved” (P, 197). As he pulled at a body, his spectacles fell to his feet and he finally concluded that he had to look, to give the dead a modicum of respect. Accepting the risk of discovering his own dead, he decided to bear witness, to affirm the murdered millions. This crematorium dream is distinguished from the earlier nightmares by its progression from graphic description and registration of the protagonist’s anger and humiliation for his own suffering to compassion for other victims. There is also a marked shift from a bitter to an elegaic tone, progressing Hebraically from expression of personal loss to collective bereavement.
In the ensuing fragment of the same dream, Wallant charts the bizarre transference of blame to the victim and thereby suggests the psychological distress experienced by many survivors who outlived their fellow sufferers. The innocent victim whose forced labor consisted of collecting bodies for the crematorium attributes sin to himself: "The smell of the burning flesh entered him, and it was as though he ate the most forbidden food" (P, 225). Whereas the initial reference to his camp job revealed pain and revulsion, the new reference to Orthodox dietary laws prohibiting the consumption of ritually impure food transforms other-directed pain to inner-directed guilt.

Thus, the Nazerman who disputed Goberman’s effort to victimize the victim through guilt repeatedly suffers similar, albeit undeserved, guilt in his dreams. Powerful dream imagery, evoking the primary will to live and misconceived guilt for doing so at another’s expense, speak eloquently to the survivor’s dilemma.

The smoke of their bodies was blowing north when this hideous hunger hit him. He lusted for rich meats and heavy pastries, had an insane yearning for wine and coffee. He dug his claw like fingernails into his thighs to punish himself for not praying to that fleeting, greasy smoke. . . . And then this lust turned to a hunger of the loins, and he wondered at the monster he was, and pulled some of his hair out. (P, 225)

To the demented victim of Nazi-inflicted horror, the instinctual human will to live, codified in Jewish law as a holy responsibility, is in the Nazi universe ironically perceived as sin, symbolized in his dreams as culinary and sexual gluttony—sins the Jew must repent and expiate.

The novelist uses a collage of elements from recurring nightmares to construct Nazerman’s final dream. Tension is heightened by interrupting the nightmare with wakeful moments that focus on present difficulties. Wallant thereby develops an emotional crescendo and conveys the impact of the Holocaust as a brutal and persistent intruder in the survivor’s postwar life. This final, intense Holocaust dream of a crematorium chimney belching all that is left of the Jews is visually reinforced by a contemporary Harlem street scene of echoing imagery. The Harlem sky “was burned to the pallid blue of scorched metal” (P, 226). In the survivor’s perspective, urban misery is a forceful reminder of camp suffering: “All the repulsive faces appeared to melt before his eyes, and Sol imag-
ined them dissolving to dark smudges on the pavement” (P, 226). The Holocaust experience is forever seared into Sol's consciousness; the streets of Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen have followed him insidiously to the streets of Harlem.

Many critics interpret the relationship between Sol Nazerman and Jesus Ortiz Christologically, arguing that the sacrificial death of Jesus Ortiz during the pawnshop robbery is the cause of Nazerman's regeneration:

The pawnbroker of limited vision, a hard and unfeeling heart, and nightmares of almost inhuman atrocities, teaches his mysteries of suffering and acquisition to the son, Jesus, who learns the lessons so well (finally) that through his own sacrifice, which is the ultimate leap of faith, he is able to motivate Sol into acknowledging human connection again and also afford Sol the possibility for his renewal of love and life. . . . Ortiz is the innocent to the end, the zealot Christ, trying to establish his kingdom.³

This assessment places excessive emphasis on the importance of one scene at the expense of the rest of the novel, reading it as the source of rather than an extension of Nazerman's continual regenerative commitments, including financial support of two families, moral support for an exploited prostitute, and dissolution, at grave personal risk, of his business partnership. These acts exemplify a spiritual rebirth in the Jewish manner of repentance and a commitment to society manifested in charitable behavior toward others. Although a Christological interpretation fits neatly into the Western tradition, it is a temptation better forgone because it is achieved at the cost of denying Jesus Ortiz's rich and complex ambiguity and by overlooking the dominant relationship established between the antagonists throughout the novel. Despite the descriptive parallels between Ortiz and Christ, such as their common rejection by establishment powers, their membership in an oppressed minority, their insistence on their own way, and their sacrificial deaths—all provocative analogies—the Ortiz of presacrificial, unrecanted, anti-Semitic conviction is an unsatisfactory redeemer, especially for a survivor of the Holocaust. Similarly, Wallant's proclivity for the Christ-like suffering model in other fiction, need not impose a Christian messianic interpretation on the Jesus character. Distinction between the historic figure's intentional sacrifice and the fictional character's accidental altruism, an in-
stinctive act that foils his own criminal design against the pawnbroker, is crucial. Jesus Ortiz is, at best, a complex "sinner-saint," a man whose single heroic act on Nazerman's behalf was consistently preceded by prejudice, deceit, and a conspiratorial crime at Nazerman's expense.

The characters' provocative emblematic names, Sol Nazerman and Jesus Ortiz, posit Wallant's brilliant, ironic inversion of the Jesus-Judas myth and simultaneously correlate Christian and Nazi anti-Semitism. Just as Saul Bellow boldly implied the link between historic Christian anti-Semitism and the Holocaust with the relationship between Jew and anti-Semite in *The Victim*, so Edward Wallant dramatizes the connection in his compelling antagonism between the survivor pawnbroker and his apprentice.

The Jesus-Nazerman business relationship may be read as an inverse parody of the historic association of the Christian king and his court Jew. Whereas European monarchs and noblemen welcomed mercantile Jews to enrich their personal and state coffers and then expelled them, Wallant's poor Puerto-Rican black begs to be initiated into the mythic business expertise of the Jew so that he may improve his own economic position. In a scornful rejection scene, Nazerman objects to Jesus' stereotypical insistence on the Jew's natural affinity for business. The Holocaust survivor's unanticipated response is a bitter summation of economic manifestations of historic Christian anti-Semitism, rather than the pure business lecture:

You begin with several thousand years during which you have nothing except a great, bearded legend, nothing else. You have no land to grow food on, no land on which to hunt, not enough time in one place to have a geography, or an army or a land myth. Only you have a little brain in your head and this bearded legend to sustain you and convince you that there is something special about you, even in your poverty. But this little brain, that is the real key. With it you obtain a small piece of cloth. . . . You take this cloth and you cut it in two and sell the two pieces for a penny or two more than you paid for the one. With this money, then, you buy a slightly larger piece of cloth, which perhaps may be cut into three pieces and sold for three pennies' profit. You must never succumb to buying an extra piece of bread at this point, a luxury like a toy for your child. Immediately you must go out and buy a still-larger cloth, or two large cloths, and repeat the process. And so you continue until there is no longer any temptation to dig in the earth and grow food, no longer any desire to
gaze at limitless land which is in your name. You repeat this process over and over for approximately twenty centuries. And then viola—you have a mercantile heritage, you are known as a merchant, a man with secret resources, usurer, pawnbroker, witch, and what have you. (P, 52)

Sol's tone is sardonic and accusatory, informed by Diaspora and Holocaust knowledge.

As the young shop assistant's efforts to ingratiate himself to his employer repeatedly fail, his anti-Semitic expression becomes increasingly shrill. Rather than a Christ-like figure offering compassionate love and sacrifice, Ortiz behaves as Christians have for twenty centuries, engaging in verbal and physical anti-Semitism. As he sits facing his church, the Tabernacle of Jesus Our Lord, he plots the pawnshop robbery, rationalizing his Judas-like betrayal of Nazerman with a classic anti-Semitic argument: “I don't owe that Sheeny nothin' really. What is he to me?” (P, 202). Like the Europeans of the past, who were philo-Semitic when it suited their national interests and anti-Semitic when it served internal political needs, who exploited Jews as convenient scapegoats, Jesus too determines to take advantage of the vulnerable Jew: “It occurred to him consciously . . . that opportunity could reside in other people's destruction” (P, 215). The downtrodden, impoverished American echoes Europe's envy of the propertied Jew that exaggerates Jewish economic power in order to justify subsequent anti-Jewish aggression, whether in religious pogrom or in a racial Final Solution. It is on the basis of such virulent anti-Semitism that Wallant ironically juxtaposes the conspiratorial Christian Judas with the betrayed Jewish Nazarene.

The novel's two crucifixion scenes parallel Christian anti-Semitism and the Nazi crime of genocide, clearly implying the development of the latter from the former. In both of these scenes, staged in Jesus’ church, Ortiz links the agonized historic Jesus with the Jewish Holocaust victim. During prerobbery meditation, Ortiz moves from sympathetic contemplation of the crucified Jesus to sadistic contemplation of the twentieth-century Jew in similar agony. “He began to chuckle, harshly. Wouldn't everybody be shocked to see Sol Nazerman up there, his arm with the blue numbers stretched out to the transfixed hand?” (P, 238). The image is emphasized and underscored in a second vision: “the figure of a heavy man, awkwardly transfixed on a cross, a man with blue,
cryptic numbers on his arm” (P, 247). Just as the baptized Jew was the martyr to Roman atrocity, so millions of non-baptized Jews through twenty centuries of Christian-ruled Europe have been martyred by Christians, whose anti-Semitic indulgences paved the way for and acquiesced to the German program of genocide. In his crucifixion contemplations, Ortiz manifests not the celebrated compassion of his namesake, but the historic persecutions against world Jewry carried out in his name by his followers. Furthermore, these scenes vividly intimate the correspondence of Ortiz’s amused post-Holocaust meditation on Jewish suffering with Holocaust-era acquiescence to the plight of the Jewish people. These repeated visual parallels of the agonized Christ and Jew ironically imply the Christian source of anti-Semitism and genocide, since both the Nazis and their European collaborators were indoctrinated in Christian theology and culture that systematically presented the Jew as a pariah, an enemy of Christendom, and a vulnerable scapegoat for repeated massacres.

Ortiz’s crucifixion meditation clearly demonstrates the correlation between religiously inspired anti-Semitism and racial and political manifestations of the same pathology. The young man’s thoughts direct the reader to associate the suffering of the crucified Christ with that of the Holocaust victim. His desire to see the contemporary Jew on the cross and his indulgence in anti-Semitic persecution revery—matters oddly ignored in the critical literature which treats Ortiz as the saintly savior of the hard-hearted Jew—constitute instead Wallant’s direct judgment of Christian Holocaust culpability, an indictment of Christian collusion in Nazi crimes against world Jewry. Thus, thematically and graphically, Wallant connects the agonized Christ not with his Christian follower, but with the Jew. “If in his consciousness Jesus conceives the Pawnbroker’s power and wisdom to come from money, in his dreams he envisions Sol as Christ.”

The metaphoric parallel of Christian and Nazi anti-Semitism established in the crucifixion scenes is dramatically substantiated in the staged pawnshop robbery on the anniversary of the Nazi slaughter of the Nazerman family. On August 28, the followers of Jesus Ortiz appear, instrument of death in hand, to rob the pawnbroker. The new violence, coming as it does on the anniversary of the old, both echoes the past and heralds a new beginning. Because Jesus steps in the path of the bullet meant for the pawnbroker, Sol mourns the “one irreplaceable Negro who had been his assistant
and who had tried to kill him but who had ended by saving him” (P, 278). Sol’s purgative tears for Ortiz allow him to express the Holocaust grief he had hitherto repressed, allow him to weep for all his dead. This new ability to express his emotions is a significant release and a further stage, rather than the initial stage, of Sol’s social rehabilitation. Having wept for those he lost, Nazerman is now able to reach out to others, to console Tessie Rubin for the recent loss of her father and to become more involved with Bertha’s family, as foreshadowed by his invitation to his nephew to become his new assistant.

Although the Ortiz sacrifice does play an important role in Sol’s emotional recognition scene, allegoric interpretation of that debt is unwarranted and is neither dramatically nor philosophically justified. To read the Ortiz sacrifice as the instigating force for Nazerman’s social regeneration, as many do, is to forget Sol’s compassionate equation of Mabel Wheatly’s degradation with that of his wife and his consequent courageous denunciation of her oppressor; is to negate his entire period of suffering during the memorial month; and is to ignore the charity he has consistently given to other survivors. Sol’s expressed concern for friends and family following Jesus’ death is not a radical change of behavior, but merely a different means of articulating an established concern; it is not a sign of new spiritual discovery for a hitherto hardened alienated man, but the second or third stage of his return to the human community, further confirmation of a philosophic affirmation previously manifested in his dissociation from the Murillio partnership and his support of the Buchenwald survivors. Nazerman’s response to the Ortiz sacrifice is consistent with his current social restoration, which is characterized by movement from self-willed isolation to engagement. Because Sol’s self-imposed withdrawal is the result of Holocaust trauma, so too an instinctively generous act confirms his recommitment when he elects to risk his life by defying a Harlem gangster on behalf of an underclass prostitute. Estranged from humanity because of the wrongs he endured, Nazerman is also recommitted to his community because he realizes, primarily from the Wheatly-Murillio association, that one must take a stand against the exploiters of the powerless, the Nazis in our midst, and ally oneself with those who suffer.

The novel’s conclusion—salvation of the spirit through a return to human community—is central to Judaic values and teaching. As such, Wallant’s affirmative thesis is comparable to those of
Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud. All are squarely in the Judaic affirmative mode and are rendered credible by Jewish historic experience, which has demonstrated that the hell people live through somehow enhances their capacity to live and love. Much as Malamud's complex Jewish-Christian encounter of Morris Bober and Frank Alpine in *The Assistant* is the precursor to the Nazerman-Ortiz relationship in *The Pawnbroker*, so is Nazerman the prototype for Saul Bellow's Holocaust survivor, Arthur Sammler. Both Nazerman and Sammler are contentious survivors; both weep for the enemies of their people—Nazerman for an anti-Semite who sought to harm him but saved his life instead, and Sammler for a fallen Egyptian soldier who died in the Six Day War trying to destroy the State of Israel and in the process effect the second genocide of the Jewish people. Nazerman follows the Jewish road to redemption in a commitment to life rather than a release from it. Had Wallant affirmed Christian salvation for a Jewish Holocaust victim, he would have betrayed both history and art. To cast Ortiz in the role of spiritual mentor and savior is too pat, too contrived to be aesthetically pleasing, philosophically convincing, or historically authentic. Instead, Wallant enhances the novel through the Jesus-Nazerman dichotomy, a brilliant, ironic inversion of the Jesus-Judas myth, which clearly rejects a simplistic, allegoric resolution in favor of a rich ambiguity and an insightful probe into the myriad possibilities of the human condition.