Witness Through the Imagination

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During the twentieth century, humanity has exhibited unparalleled creative and destructive capacities. Germany—celebrated for its cultural and scientific achievements—embraced a political system and supported a technological program designed to annihilate an entire people singled out by racial criteria. The Germans and their accomplices murdered six million Jews, filling mass graves with the corpses and ashes of tortured, mutilated, starved, shot, and gassed victims. The victims—of all ages, all social, educational, and economic strata, and every political persuasion—were a population whose crime was being descended from a Jewish grandparent. Unlike earlier massacres of ethnic populations, the Nazi endeavor was the first to technologically implement the systematic annihilation of an entire people. That the *Shoah* is a focal point of Jewish history is self-evident. The Holocaust should be recognized as a turning point in world history, a catastrophe that altered fundamental assumptions about the human condition. Pre-Auschwitz innocence has been forever obliterated. We no longer harbor the beliefs about God, civilization, and
man that once assured us. Just as the Trojan War engaged the imagination of Homer and Virgil and the French Revolution inspired Wordsworth and Shelley, so, in our time, when the magnitude of horrors surpassed previous upheavals, has the Holocaust informed artistic sensibilities. It was inevitable that when the destructive efforts of politicians, bureaucrats, and technocrats were brought to an end, the historians, archivists, diarists, and artists would begin to document and interpret the Holocaust and explore the peculiarities of human nature revealed in the Holocaust. Some observers argue that the Shoah defies comprehension. Yet we may come closer to comprehension through the efforts of artists whose works incorporate and transcend representational reality, rather than through histories and eyewitness accounts. This book chronicles and analyzes the encounter between the American literary imagination and the Holocaust as seen through the perspective of ten Jewish-American prose writers, writers who by virtue of geography escaped the direct effects of the event, but nevertheless elected to bear “witness-through-the-imagination.”

Holocaust is the most widely used English term to designate the 1933–1945 war against the Jews, a war that began with the burning of books and culminated in the burning of human beings in the crematoria and lime pits of Nazi-occupied Europe. Although the word holocaust suggests an apocalyptic destruction, it also has an unfortunate sacrificial connotation suggesting a biblical burnt offering, which is “consistent with a prevailing Christian reading of Jewish history.” Although the sacrificial connotation of the word renders it morally objectionable for me, I use it since it is the most widely accepted term in common and scholarly usage. However, I occasionally employ the Hebrew word shoah and the Yiddish word hurban as preferable alternatives. Hebrew and Yiddish nomenclature refute the affirmative theological overtones of the Greek-derived holocaust and signify instead the rupture in the collective consciousness engendered by the destruction of one-third of world Jewry. The biblical word shoah, meaning ruin, calamity, desolation, was reintroduced in modern Hebrew to suggest the cataclysmic destruction of European Jewry that transformed conceptions of God, society, and man. The Yiddish term hurban shares the implications of Shoah and alludes to a long history of catastrophes.

Criticism of Holocaust literature is an emerging field of inquiry, and as might be expected, the most innovative work has concentrated on the vanguard of European and Israeli Holocaust
literature. Now that American fiction has amassed an impressive and provocative Holocaust canon, the time is propitious for its evaluation. The impetus for this study came from admiration for the analyses of European and Israeli Holocaust literature by Lawrence Langer, Alvin Rosenfeld, Sidra Ezrahi, Edward Alexander, Alan Mintz, and David Roskies, and the complementary belief that American Holocaust literature had not received the critical explication and assessment it merits. Aside from Alan Berger's recent fine study *Crisis and Covenant* (1985), examination of American works has been limited to occasional chapters in books emphasizing European literature, short articles in scholarly journals, and brief reviews. This study differs from its predecessors in the scope of its analysis of the American material, and differs from Berger's in its focus on literary explication and the authors and titles studied. Berger examines literature as a vehicle for demonstrating the impact of the Holocaust on covenantal Judaism. I present a critical reading of themes and stylistic strategies of major American Holocaust fiction to determine its capacity to render the prelude, progress, and aftermath of the Holocaust.

In deciding what to include from a substantial body of literature, I selected writing that addresses the Jewish experience. Although Nazi crimes against humanity touched many non-Jews and included the mass murders of other peoples, this volume is limited to the particularity of the Jewish experience as interpreted by Jewish-American writers. Thus, although William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* and Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* are of significant interest both for their treatment of the Nazi period and their stylistic strategies, they are outside the scope of this book. Another consideration for the selection of materials was the practical concern for length. Therefore, I omitted two superior novels, Norma Rosen's *Touching Evil* and Susan Schaeffer's *Anya.* Rather than prepare an encyclopedic review of American Holocaust fiction, I have analyzed representative works of artistic merit that render the Holocaust in exemplary, innovative, and influential ways and that share common themes and rhetorical patterns. Included are works by critically acclaimed writers, meritorious works by writers whose reputations are still growing, and recent publications that await the critical attention and recognition they deserve.

The book includes an introductory chapter addressing the complexities of American Holocaust literature, its major themes and technical strategies. The following chapters address the Holo-
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caus fiction of Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, I. B. Singer, Edward Lewis Wallant, Cynthia Ozick, Leslie Epstein, George Steiner, Richard Elman, Arthur A. Cohen, and Chaim Potok. Some chapters deal with a single work. Where the writer's canon includes several Holocaust titles, analysis is more extensive. The rich diversity of American Holocaust literature is revealed through the fiction set in ghettos and concentration camps, which focuses on victimization and accommodation to the Nazi hegemony in Europe, and the fiction set in post-Holocaust America and Israel, which relates the past through physical and psychological survivors of varied national backgrounds, social strata, and generations.

The unifying critical approach is the textual explication of themes and literary method, occasional comparative references to international Holocaust literature, and a discussion of extra-literary Holocaust sources that have influenced the creative writers' treatment of the Holocaust universe. Among the common subjects and themes explored are the connections between historic anti-Semitism and Nazi genocide; dehumanization of victims; Holocaust era survival strategies; postwar survivor syndrome, including behavioral and attitudinal transformations ranging from despair and nihilism to spiritual regeneration and social restoration; Holocaust moral accountability; and theological, social, and psychological implications of the Holocaust. The recurrent devices and techniques found in this literature include the introduction of historic figures in the fictional universe; the introduction of the concentrationary universe character types—types hitherto unknown to American fiction; the juxtaposition of documentary realism with metaphoric and symbolic evocations of the "concentrationary world"; surrealistic nightmares; voluntary and spontaneous memories; the inversion of conventional literary forms; and the inversion of liturgical language to repudiate traditional literature's implicit premises of order and explicit philosophic and social affirmations.

While some of the sources I examine are well known, others have thus far had a limited readership. Consequently, some chapters include introductory material, while others assume reader familiarity with the texts. Fully half of the works focus on the preservation of Jewish cultural and religious identity and incorporate references to Jewish sacred studies and liturgies that demand thorough explication. For example, Cohen, Potok, Ozick, Bellow, and Singer employ explicit discussion of Jewish law and literature and include Judaic archetypes and allusions to religious sources that
require exegesis. This group of novelists also allude to pre-Holocaust Jewish history, which needs explication. Similarly, Epstein's extraordinarily dense use of ghetto documentation requires reference to his research sources. My intention is to suit the critical method to the requirements of the texts rather than impose an artificial, unifying critical structure.