In Tolstoy’s novel *War and Peace* the captured Pierre is brought in to be interrogated by the French General Davoust. The General is aggressive, accuses his captive of being a spy, and when Pierre gives his name asks: “What proof have I that you are not lying?”

“*Monseigneur!*” exclaimed Pierre in a tone that betrayed not offence but entreaty.

Davoust lifted his eyes and gazed searchingly at him. For some seconds they looked at one another, and that look saved Pierre. It went beyond the circumstances of war and the court-room, and established human relations between the two men. Both of them in that one instant were dimly aware of an infinite number of things, and they realized that they were both children of humanity, that they were brothers.

When Davoust had first half raised his head from his memorandum, where men’s lives and doings were indicated by numbers, Pierre had been only a case, and Davoust could have had him shot without burdening his conscience with an evil deed; but now he saw in him a human being. (1140–41)

For anyone familiar with accounts of the terrible events of the Nazi Holocaust this passage is likely to inspire conflicting responses. The sentiment that the pen is mightier than the sword is an ancient one, yet Tolstoy’s per-
ception that modernity vastly increases its purchase is prophetic. His vision of a murderer whose countless victims are never confronted in person but whose “lives and doings” are indicated only by numbers points straight towards the genocidal acts of Eichmann and his fellow bureaucrats, who killed millions who were literally “just numbers” to them. At the same time, Tolstoy’s confidence that face-to-face contact between individuals will render killing difficult or impossible may well seem misplaced to a modern reader. Emmanuel Lévinas—who had firsthand experience of the horrors of Nazism—was able to maintain a Tolstoyan belief in his 1953 essay “Freedom and Command” that the

absolute nakedness of a face, the absolutely defenseless face, without covering, clothing or mask, is what opposes my power over it, my violence, and opposes it in an absolute way, with an opposition which is opposition in itself. The being that expresses itself, that faces me, says no to me by his very expression. This no is not merely formal, but it is not the no of a hostile force or a threat; it is the impossibility of killing him who presents that face . . . (21)

Most of us, however, are more likely to believe that if there is one lesson that can be learned from the Holocaust, it is that, as a line from Geoffrey Hill’s poem “Ovid in the Third Reich” expresses it, “Innocence is no earthly weapon.”

Testimony is, of its very nature, if not face-to-face then certainly a matter of personal witness, and using accounts by and about single individuals to depict aspects of the Holocaust is very far from uncontentious. Such a focus, it has been argued, risks obscuring the mass, industrialized nature of the murders, and it may also encourage us to attribute utterly inappropriate powers of self-determination and choice to victims. Accounts of individuals risk transforming the exception (survival) into the representative example. More disturbingly, any attempt to make the experience of a single survivor somehow representative of the fate of thousands—or millions—may unintentionally reduce victims to a uniformity that is worryingly reminiscent of the Nazi assertion that all racial Untermensch are essentially the same. It is a useful thought-exercise to imagine how we ourselves would feel were we to know that our own life and fate were to be preserved only through the memory of the life and fate of a friend or contemporary who would somehow “represent” us.

Against this it can be argued that a refusal to portray any of the victims
of the Nazis as individuals also dehumanizes them: photographs of bodies being bulldozed into mass graves do nothing to display the humanity of the murdered. We cannot dispense with the accounts of the historian for whom most of the millions of victims are inevitably “indicated by numbers.” But to convey the humanity of victims and the full extent of the guilt of perpetrators and bystanders, accounts by and about individuals are irreplaceable. To appropriate a distinction made by Roland Barthes, we can say that if the wide sweep of the historian gives us the “studium,” the personal account of the individual provides us with the “punctum.” In his essay “The Grey Zone” (in The Drowned and the Saved), Primo Levi refers to the Holocaust account that has probably been read more than any other, noting that “a single Anne Frank excites more emotion than the myriads who suffered as she did but whose image has remained in the shadows.” And he adds: “if we had to and were able to suffer the sufferings of everyone, we could not live” (39).

However, perhaps the strongest ground for insisting on the importance of narratives that focus on encounters between individuals is that survivors themselves repeatedly include such accounts in their own writings. Here, for example, is a brief passage from the memoir of a Norwegian Auschwitz survivor, Herman Sachnowitz, in which he remembers his first meeting with a fellow-inmate named Felix Pavlowsky.

I had noticed him as we were singing—he was lying on his stomach in one of the upper bunks, relaxing. He was a good-looking man with a strong, firm-looking face. When he got up and jumped down to the floor I noticed he was a little bent over. His eyes were blue and friendly. His age was difficult to determine, since his head was shaved. The chevron on his chest was red. But what distinguished him most from the rest of the inmates—and what riveted my attention in a special way—was his smile. It was a wry and sad little smile that had so much in it, I was not sure how to interpret it right. Was it pity, or compassion? Was it cordiality, or deep wisdom? It seemed to me that the smile emanated from a person that really understood how we felt. (67)

As I will argue below, the smile and a curiosity about others are markers of humanity that recur time and time again in survivor accounts. In its miraculous compression this passage tells us volumes about Sachnowitz, Pavlowsky, and what was sometimes preserved in the camps and discovered by victims through personal encounters. But what of encounters that involve perpetrators?
1. Victims and Perpetrators

Charlotte Delbo’s extraordinary nonfictional trilogy *Auschwitz and After*—extraordinary both in terms of what it recounts and in terms of Delbo’s creative mixing of narrative and poetic genres to convey her multifaceted experiences and musings over them—provides ample proof that in Auschwitz confronting one’s persecutor directly guaranteed no such shared moment of perceived humanity. “The Farewell”—a short, self-contained account in the first part of the trilogy—recounts Delbo’s observation of a female guard named Drexler who was supervising the loading of women into a truck taking them to the gas chamber.

The Drexler woman observes the departure. Her fists on her hips, she supervises, like a foreman who oversees a job and is satisfied.

The women in the truck do not shout. Pressed tightly together they try to release their arms from their torsos. It is incomprehensible that one would still try to work an arm free, that one could wish to lean on something.

One of the women thrusts her chest far over the side panel. Straight. Stiff. Her eyes shine. She looks on Drexler with hate, scorn, a scorn that should kill. She did not shout with the others, her face is ravaged only by illness.

The truck starts up. Drexler follows it with her eyes.

As the truck pulls away, she waves a farewell and laughs. She is laughing. And for a long time she keeps on waving good-bye. (51)

The passage confirms what the history of our time has corroborated innumerable times already: human beings observe and even interact with those they are mistreating or murdering without displaying pity or remorse. They may even, as here, appear to enjoy the suffering they are inflicting. Sixty-seven years after Delbo observed Drexler’s behavior, a thirty-two-year-old Norwegian named Anders Behring Breivik detonated a massive bomb outside a Norwegian government building, killing eight people. He then traveled to an island outside Oslo named Utøya, where the Labour Party youth organization was holding a summer camp. There he proceeded to shoot participants, killing an additional sixty-nine individuals, most of whom were teenagers or young adults, and the youngest of whom was a girl of fourteen. Many of those who survived reported that as he killed he smiled and laughed. Writing these words in Trondheim a week after this atrocity, I find...
that the implicit question in Delbo’s account has an added force for me. Why is Drexler laughing?

The narrator of Anne Michaels’s novel *Fugitive Pieces* suggests one answer.

If the Nazis required that humiliation precede extermination, then they admitted exactly what they worked so hard to avoid admitting: the humanity of the victim. To humiliate is to accept that your victim feels and thinks, that he not only feels pain, but knows that he’s being degraded. And because the torturer knew in an instant of recognition that his victim was not a “figu en” but a man, and knew at that moment he must continue his task, he suddenly understood the Nazi mechanism. Just as the stone-carrier knew his only chance of survival was to fulfil his task as if he didn’t know its futility, so the torturer decided to do his job as if he didn’t know the lie. The photos capture again and again this chilling moment of choice: the laughter of the damned. When the soldier realized that only death has the power to turn “man” into “figu en,” his difficulty was solved. And so the rage and sadism increased: his fury at the victim for suddenly turning human; his desire to destroy that humanness so intense his brutality had no limit. (166)

Michaels’s analysis suggests, paradoxically, that the most extreme cruelties of the Nazis were not the result of a failure to recognize the humanity of their victims but, on the contrary, the result of just such a recognition. A Tolstoyan recognition of the humanity of your potential victim may, if Michaels is right, lead to a grotesque frustration that erupts in acts of cruelty designed to remove the victim’s humanity in the only way remaining: by killing him or her. The analysis carries with it the paradoxical implication that in certain circumstances it may be safer for the victim to be perceived as not human.

Primo Levi’s *If This Is a Man* contains a chapter titled “Chemical Examination” in which Levi describes another person-to-person encounter between perpetrator and victim (himself). A prisoner in Auschwitz, Levi is attempting to prolong and even to save his life by obtaining work in a laboratory. He has reported that he is a chemist and is taken to be interviewed by a Doktor Pannwitz to see if his skills can be used by the Germans. Perhaps because the account (unusually) depicts a confrontation between two individuals alone in a room, the account is uncannily reminiscent of the previously quoted scene in *War and Peace.*
Pannwitz is tall, thin, blond; he has eyes, hair and nose as all Germans ought to have them, and sits formidably behind a complicated writing-table. I, Häftling 174517, stand in his office, which is a real office, shining, clean and ordered, and I feel that I would leave a dirty stain on whatever I touched.

When he finished writing, he raised his eyes and looked at me.

From that day I have thought about Doktor Pannwitz many times and in many ways. I have asked myself how he really functioned as a man; how he filled his time, outside of the Polymerization and the Indo-Germanic conscience; above all when I was once more a free man, I wanted to meet him again, not from a spirit of revenge, but merely from a personal curiosity about the human soul.

Because that look was not one between two men; and if I had known how completely to explain the nature of that look, which came as if across the glass window of an aquarium between two beings who live in different worlds, I would also have explained the essence of the great insanity of the third Germany.

One felt in that moment, in an immediate manner, what we all thought and said of the Germans. The brain which governed those blue eyes and those manicured hands said: “This something in front of me belongs to a species which it is obviously opportune to suppress. In this particular case, one has to first make sure that it does not contain some utilisable element.”

And in my head, like seeds in an empty pumpkin: “Blue eyes and fair hair are essentially wicked. No communication possible. I am a specialist in mine chemistry. I am a specialist in organic syntheses. I am a specialist . . .” (111–12, ellipsis in original)

Here there is no confident reassurance that direct eye contact between two men can penetrate the distorting and corrupting interference of nation, creed, and culture, no mutual perception of each other’s humanity. Not only is Pannwitz portrayed as perceiving Levi as a species that is not human (Levi is “it,” not “he”), but reading Levi’s account we are encouraged to wonder whether Pannwitz can himself be reckoned within the ranks of humanity. In spite of Levi’s curiosity about him “as a man” and as a possessor of a “human soul,” his failure to perceive Levi’s humanity undermines his own claim to be a member of the human race. As Levi has it: “that look was not one between two men.” If Anne Michaels is right, this may have saved Levi’s life.

The scene as presented constitutes a direct challenge to Tolstoyan optimism and to the confident liberal-humanist meliorism to which it has contributed. The scene implies that we possess no “essential humanity” but
instead develop whatever humanity we possess through engagement with the cultural, historical, and political realities into which we are thrust. In other words, there is no extra-social self that can be miraculously exposed by means of an exchanged gaze with another. There is only the self that we develop through action in the world and interaction with others: that self is what we are, even if we may be compelled to conceal it from others on occasions. While War and Peace is a work of fiction, If This Is a Man is an autobiographical account of Primo Levi’s time in Auschwitz. Tolstoy’s narrator is thus able to tell the reader about things of which neither of his characters is more than “dimly aware.” When we read that Pierre and Davoust “realized that they were both children of humanity, that they were brothers,” the form of the narrative allows for the possibility that this realization is not a fully conscious or verbalized one—there is a sense in which the passage invites the reader to assume that the narrator is providing words for sensations that are indistinctly apprehended rather than understood by the two. (We cannot in a brief moment of time put “an infinite number of things” into words.) A fictional narrator can know things of his or her characters that human beings can never know for sure about their fellows.

Levi’s narrative technique is, necessarily, very different from Tolstoy’s but it is no less subtle and complex. It plays with the relation between the experiencing-I and the narrating-I, the gap between the Levi who can sign his own death warrant by the wrong word or gesture and the Levi in his secure postwar world looking safely and mockingly back in time at the (now) absurdly limited Pannwitz. Note, for example, how the changes in the form of the verb in the first three paragraphs (“is tall,” “he finished,” “I have thought”) denote and evoke significant shifts of perspective on the events described.

Pannwitz’s dehumanizing vision of Häftling-Levi is countered by narrating-Levi’s derisive portrayal of the somehow not-fully-human Pannwitz. We thus get a very clear sense of the scene as composed of three participants: Häftling-Levi, Pannwitz, and narrating-Levi. As I read the passage I have a clear visual-spatial sense of the powerful Pannwitz looming large over the terrified prisoner-Levi, while above and behind him looms the unremarked author-Levi, with a cool, mocking, but also appalled smile on his face. I see him smiling because there clearly is a strain of very somber humor in this passage—witness the first quoted paragraph. And if Anne Michaels associates the laughing of the perpetrators with their frustrated recognition of their victims’ humanity, so too the humor in this passage can be explained only by narrating-Levi’s recognition of some element of twisted human-like qualities in Pannwitz. But if recognizing the humanity of their victims
prompts cruelty and murder on the part of the perpetrators, the humor that bespeaks a recognition of something human in Pannwitz leads not to “a spirit of revenge” in Levi but to *curiosity*. In “The Quiet City,” one of the essays in *Moments of Reprieve*, Primo Levi makes it clear that his curiosity about Pannwitz was not an isolated experience: “It might be surprising that in the Camps one of the most frequent states of mind was curiosity. And yet, besides being frightened, humiliated and desperate, we were curious: hungry for bread and also to understand” (99). Levi’s curiosity about Pannwitz infects the reader so completely that as we follow Levi’s account of the meeting between his younger self and the German, we almost forget “Häftling-Levi.” If our human sympathies are all with the victim, it is the perpetrator who inspires and then monopolizes our curiosity. Indeed, to a very large extent “understanding the Holocaust” has to be a matter of attempting to understand the perpetrators: the sufferings of victims demand our respect and our witness, but they cannot explain the human actions that have produced these sufferings.

Some sense of the complex narrative orchestration of the passage is necessary to engage with other details in it. “I, Häftling 174517, stand in his office, which is a real office, shining, clean and ordered.” What is the force of that “which is a real office”? What else could it be? Does not this communicate to us that sense of the surrealistic in the meeting? The office is “real” in the sense that it is indistinguishable from offices in the normal world outside (and after) Auschwitz, offices in which bosses do not send their employees to the gas chamber. For Levi, too, its “real-ness” strikes him so forcibly doubtless because of its contrast to the horror he has become used to in the camp. For the reader, though, this mixture of the familiar and the quotidian with the unfamiliar and the obscene helps to link the hideous reality of the Holocaust with our day-to-day experiences, just as the familiar furniture of our waking life can exist within our worst nightmares. The hardest challenge to us in this passage is to accept that some of the furniture of Auschwitz was and is just like the furniture of our own familiar world, that Auschwitz was both a world apart and our world.

Levi’s alternation between his two historically distinct selves is not without its risks. There is a danger in thus narrating the experiences of the suffering victim from the perspective of the survivor. In another of Charlotte Delbo’s short sequences—“Morning”—we can, I think, see an alternative way of negotiating this danger.

I am standing amid my comrades and I think to myself that if I ever return and will want to explain the inexplicable, I shall say: “I was saying
to myself: you must stay standing through roll call. You must get through one more day. It is because you got through today that you will return one day, if you ever return.” This is not so. Actually I did not say anything to myself. I thought of nothing. The will to resist was doubtlessly buried in some deep, hidden spring which is now broken, I will never know. And if the women who died had required those who returned to account for what had taken place, they would be unable to do so. I thought of nothing. I felt nothing. I was a skeleton of cold, with cold blowing through all the crevices in between a skeleton’s ribs. (64)

In technical terms, what we see here is a hypothetical alternative response to her suffering, presented so that it is first read not as hypothetical but as actual. The suffering Delbo is initially characterized as heroic, as one capable of hanging on to hope, not stripped of the capacity to desire survival, not too reduced to have lost the will to resist. Why does Delbo dangle this optimistic—almost sentimental—fiction in front of the reader, only to snatch it away? First, I think, to underscore the danger that her present self will rewrite the past and will inject qualities into her camp-self that were not there; and, second, in order to remind us of the stereotypes and clichés that we must strip away if we are to come close to the unheroic reality of what the Nazis reduced their victims to. However, these two suggestions may make the backtracking in the sequence more considered, more artful, than it is or was. It is tempting to read the first quoted sentence as having been written in good faith, with the qualification that follows it the result of brutally honest self-revision on Delbo’s part. And having that possibility in mind serves to alert the reader to the enormous difficulty faced by the survivor who attempts after the event to narrate his or her experience as a victim.

Levi uses a different method to prevent the reader from confusing his victim-self, whose head is like an empty pumpkin containing a few seeds, with his survivor-self, a self that is relaxed, and curious about Pannwitz in ways that had to be unavailable to him at the time. If I suggested earlier that Pannwitz’s inability to see Levi as a human being is symmetrically matched by the narrating-Levi’s inability to grant full humanity to Pannwitz, there is also a crucial element of asymmetry. Had Pannwitz sent Levi to the gas chamber, it would doubtless have been, as Tolstoy remarks of Davoust prior to his meeting Pierre’s eyes, “without a thought.” Levi, however, a free man back in Italy and a witness to the destruction of all that Pannwitz stood and worked for, does not dismiss him from his thought. “From that day I have thought about Doktor Pannwitz many times and in many ways.” Levi wants to understand Pannwitz in the way that Tolstoy understands Pierre
and Davoust—but he cannot. This seeking for such knowledge, however, this curiosity about another person confirms Levi's humanity. In marked contrast, Pannwitz's total lack of interest in anything about Levi beyond his skills as a chemist puts his own incomplete humanity on display. Not only does Levi think about Pannwitz, but he also requires us to think about him too. And by contrasting his own curiosity about Pannwitz with Pannwitz's total lack of interest in himself, Levi manages to exhibit in his narrative what it is that makes him fully human and Pannwitz less than this. Levi's account, in other words, contains instructions to us on how to avoid becoming like Pannwitz. Among them: be curious about others. Indeed, to return briefly to my opening quotation from Herman Sachnowitz's memoir, we can say that Sachnowitz's curiosity about Pavlowsky as they interact depicts their shared humanity as something that is generated and sustained through a process of active mutual exploration.

In his memoir Hanged at Auschwitz, French Jew Sim Kessel tells a story that contains a number of quite extraordinary events. At the same time, the very fact that Kessel survived only by virtue of such extraordinary strokes of chance and luck demonstrates the point that survivor memoirs can by their very nature be misleadingly unrepresentative. Kessel was twice rescued from an apparently inevitable death because his past as a professional boxer enabled him to appeal to sympathy from two of his captors who had also been boxers. The first time he is minutes away from death, standing naked in a group of prisoners destined for the gas chamber, waiting for more victims to make up the numbers so that the gassings are economic. A group of SS men ride up on motorcycles, and one of them positions himself near Kessel. Looking at his face, Kessel recognizes “the marks of a boxer: broken nose, ridges over the eyes, cauliflower ears.”

I simply blurted out in German:

“Boxer?”

“Boxer? Ja!”

He didn't wait for me to explain, he understood. I too had a broken nose. An enormous bond existed between the two of us, despite the poles-apart difference in our positions. A few feet away, naked scarecrows stared at us and forgot for a moment their imminent deaths.

He questioned me.

“Where'd you fight?”

“Pacra, Central, Delbor, Japy, and once at the Vel d’Hiver.”

Focal points of boxing, universally known. Something like a smile flickered briefly over his flattened face, revealing a row of metal-capped
teeth. He hesitated for a moment, looked around, and made a quick decision.

“Get on!” he bellowed.

Apparently he was in charge of the S.S. detachment; I suppose he didn’t stand to lose a thing. Anyway, the miracle had happened. (117–18)

Kessel gets, naked, on to the motorcycle and is driven to safety. The fantastic nature of his personal survival does not end here. Condemned to death at a later point in his imprisonment in Auschwitz, he is sentenced to be publically hanged. But during the hanging the rope breaks. Because the Nazis cannot admit publicly that anything has gone wrong, he is taken away and scheduled for execution the next day. But again he has an ex-boxer as a guard, and again the man allows him to escape and assume a new identity.

The passage quoted recounts extraordinary events, but is not the most extraordinary aspect of this brief scene Kessel’s report that “[a]n enormous bond existed between the two of us”? There is a minor irony, of course, in the fact that this bond is founded on a common involvement in that most brutal of sports, boxing. This bond is established with hardly any words, primarily on the basis of the physical scars left by a career as a boxer, and it is acknowledged by the German almost without apparent cerebration by (again!) “something like a smile” that flickers “briefly over his flattened face.” Kessel is not at all sentimental about this moment. He certainly does not present the reader with a Tolstoyan moment of mutually perceived, common humanity. He goes on to remind his reader that this was a man who had been instrumental in the murder of very large numbers of innocent victims, that he doubtless went on to murder thousands more (including those other naked victims waiting with Kessel), and that his action in saving Kessel was in the nature of a whim, much like a man who decides not to step on a worm. What this man did was almost unimaginably evil, and this one act of cynical and possibly sentimental mercy is but a single drop in an ocean of wickedness. If the other victims waiting with Kessel could write their accounts, they would not be like the account we are able to read. It is only some time later in his account when Kessel reminds us of these victims that we realize that his narrative has carried us along, celebrating his escape and forgetting the murders.

Having said all this, the account still contains, from the perspective of the Nazi perpetrators, an element of Tolstoyan subversiveness. It suggests that some sort of recognition of, if not a shared humanity then a shared something, could break out in the most unlikely situations. The almost-smile betokens again something approaching a recognition of the victim’s human-
2. Victim and Collaborator-Victim

Tadeusz Borowski’s chilling short story “This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen” was first published in Polish in 1948. Although Borowski’s stories, collected in English in a book with the same title, are presented as fiction, they build on Borowski’s experiences as a non-Jewish political prisoner in Auschwitz, where he had a number of relatively (but only relatively) privileged jobs. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi has commented that in some cases “the testimonial imperative so controls the artistic impulse that the boundary between the memoir literature and the fiction (the histoire as history and as story) seems hardly distinguishable” (23). Borowski’s stories surely represent one such case. Like Primo Levi, Borowski took his own life (ironically by gassing himself) after the war, in 1951. He was not yet thirty. In his introduction to This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen, Jan Kott comments, “The most terrifying thing in Borowski’s stories is the icy detachment of the author” (24). Reading the stories, one can see what Kott means, but his characterization strikes me as not quite right, and I will try to explain why.

The following sequence comes from the title story in This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen. The story is set at the point of disembarkment for victims arriving at Auschwitz by train. The first-person narrator of the story—like Borowski himself—has a job sorting and storing the possessions stripped from the new arrivals, who are to be sent either straight to the gas chamber or on to slave labor, starvation, and death by maltreatment or gassing. From the mass of those arriving the narrator’s attention is suddenly directed to a single individual.

She descends lightly from the train, hops on to the gravel, looks around inquiringly, as if somewhat surprised. Her soft, blonde hair has fallen on her shoulders in a torrent, she throws it back impatiently. With a natural gesture she runs her hands down her blouse, casually straightens her skirt. She stands like this for an instant, gazing at the crowd, then turns and with a gliding look examines our faces, as though searching for someone. Unknowingly, I continue to stare at her, until our eyes meet.

“Listen, tell me, where are they taking us?”

I look at her without saying a word. Here, standing before me, is a girl, a girl with enchanting blonde hair, with beautiful breasts, wearing a little
cotton blouse, a girl with a wise, mature look in her eyes. Here she stands, gazing straight into my face, waiting. And over there is the gas chamber: communal death, disgusting and ugly. And over in the other direction is the concentration camp: the shaved head, the heavy Soviet trousers in sweltering heat, the sickening, stale odour of dirty, damp female bodies, the animal hunger, the inhuman labour, and later the same gas chamber, only an even more hideous, more terrible death . . .

Why did she bring it? I think to myself, noticing a lovely gold watch on her delicate wrist. They’ll take it away from her anyway.

“Listen, tell me,” she repeats.

I remain silent. Her lips tighten.

“I know,” she says with a shade of proud contempt in her voice, tossing her head. She walks off resolutely in the direction of the trucks. Someone tries to stop her; she boldly pushes him aside and runs up the steps. In the distance I can only catch a glimpse of her blonde hair flaying in the breeze.

As with the passage describing Primo Levi’s encounter with Doktor Pannewitz, this extract is disturbing in ways that are not easy to isolate.

Borowski understands that to portray the obscenity of murder, we must be confronted with what death deletes—life in all its fullness. The passage stuns us not by depicting a person being tormented and killed, but simply by depicting a person—a person who will be killed. As Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi puts it, “Borowski’s characters are human, and even as they collaborate, even as they adopt an attitude of indifference or even cynicism in order to get through the day’s work, they cannot banish the images of human suffering that lodge in their memory” (56). And if Pannwitz’s inability to perceive Levi’s humanity makes him less than human, Borowski’s narrator’s shamed perception of the young woman’s life and humanity reminds him and us of his and of his author’s membership of the human race. The portrayal of the fully human woman forces us to confront what will be or has been destroyed by her murder. She is presented as physically attractive, but more important she is presented as fully alive. She is light on her feet, active, enquiring, impatient, natural—and she asserts her quality as a living human being by—again—her curiosity, by seeking contact with other living human beings.

Moreover, as her “gliding look” examines “our faces,” the reader is forced into the narrator’s subject-position and required to experience as his or her own a refusal to answer her question honestly and fully. The passage prompts the question: in the narrator’s position, in Auschwitz, what would we have done? Would we have been heroic enough to provide the answer
that might have threatened our own vulnerable security in a “safe” job? In this sense the woman’s gaze challenges both the narrator and the reader. She confronts us as a human being and requires us to respond in like manner. Who among us can be sure that, unlike Borowski’s narrator, we would have had the courage to grant the woman a full, open, and honest human response?

Like Tolstoy and Levi, Borowski depicts an encounter that focuses on direct eye-to-eye contact between two individuals. And in the life, independence, and bravery of the young woman the narrator perceives the loss of significant parts of his own humanity. She meets him openly and honestly, asks him a question as an equal, and is denied an honest and open answer. His failure to rise to her challenge to be a human being provokes her “shade of proud contempt” for his suppressed humanity, and it stands as a marker for a personhood that the Nazis, as Anne Michaels points out, both denied in and attempted to remove from their victims. As we read the passage, her contempt becomes first the narrator’s self-contempt and then, through our identification with the narrator, ours too. In the face of the narrator’s inaction and tacit compliance, she “walks off resolutely” and “boldly” pushes aside someone who tries to stop her.

In a passage discussing his curiosity about “the lords of evil,” Primo Levi suggests that “the essential inadequacy of documentary evidence” to satisfy this curiosity means that the depths of a human being are more likely to be given to us by the poet or dramatist than by the historian or psychologist (Moments of Reprieve 99–100). Not all commentators have felt that imaginative literature can extend our understanding of the Holocaust. In an essay titled “Aharon Appelfeld and the Problem of Holocaust Fiction,” for example, Bernard Harrison cites Berel Lang’s argument that “certain features essential to imaginative fiction make it incapable of dealing effectively with the historical realities of the Holocaust.”

Lang notes, to begin with, that imaginative fiction lives by the representation and analysis of individual consciousness in all its diversity. It is equally essential to our understanding of the Holocaust, Lang suggests, to see that, by its nature, it denied the diversity of consciousness. That denial is, for Lang, a function of the dispersal of causality. The fate which overtook European Jewry was neither the consequence of, nor capable of being averted by, any act or volition on the part of its victims; equally, it was in the nature of Nazism that it worked to submerge the individual wills and personalities of its adherents and tools in the workings of a vast and impersonal bureaucracy of death. So far, then, as Holocaust fiction follows
the general rule of all fiction in representing to its readers characters whose choices determine events, it falsifies its subject matter. (80)

If we direct such criticisms back toward the passage from Borowski’s story, how much force do they have?

The passage does not, it is true, depict an individual able to determine her own destiny. But it does show us an individual attempting so to do. That the narrator knows, and we know, that this attempt must fail does not render this depiction false or misleading. Moreover, while the Nazi project of genocide attempted to deny “the diversity of consciousness” in its chosen victims, this is not to say that it always succeeded. Who are we to deny the right of each individual victim to his or her most personal and private experiences in the face of oppression and murder? We know, it is true, that the Nazis did succeed in denying most of the objects of their murderous plan the ability to make any choice that could determine events, but it would be insulting to the dead to presume to know what choices they attempted or what unique individual sufferings they went through and reflected upon. In the above-quoted passage from Borowski, there is no optimistic attempt to portray the young woman as one who may fall through the Nazi net. There is no SS man on a motorcycle there to save her, and the narrator spells out to us what awaits her—what awaited her nonfictional fellows. Moreover, even in the presentation of the narrator himself we do not quite witness a man who has no will apart from that of obeying the orders of his oppressors. The very fact of his shame, of his ability to register the young woman’s contempt, reveals that, in contrast to Doktor Pannwitz, he has not been totally stripped of his personhood. This surely is something quite different from “icy detachment.”

3. Survivors and Perpetrators

Eva Schloss’s account of her arrest, deportation, and incarceration in Auschwitz ends with an account of a meeting, after liberation, with a man in the striped uniform of a prisoner who tells her and her fellows that he is an escaped prisoner. They are suspicious of him but feed him and send him in the direction of the Russian forces. The next day they witness him with his hands tied behind his back, being roughly treated by his Russian captors. When they protest this treatment, the exasperated Russians reveal his SS tattoo. “Oddly enough we weren’t pleased in any way, we were extremely upset. We should have been immune to any kind of suffering but we were not. It sickened us to imagine what was going to happen to him. It was a strange
emotional reaction” (157). The reaction is indeed “strange”—to us as much as to the author. Most important: our disquiet is unstable and volatile; it does not settle down into an ordered meaning, but remains to disturb us as we search for a reconciliation between these forces that we cannot find. It is again a reaction that evokes curiosity and requires discussion.

At the risk of a banal pointing out of the obvious, what comes across so strongly in this particular encounter is the fact that the liberated prisoners, who have had their humanity denied and assaulted in the most extreme form, find it immediately at hand when faced by the need of another human being—even if in this case the human being in question must be ranked among the least deserving of humane consideration. Does this account allow us to accord Tolstoy’s optimistic belief in the possibility of establishing human contact between the empowered and the disempowered some credence? What about the readers of this account, we who have experienced none of the horrors or cruelties of the Holocaust? Can we share any of Schloss’s sympathy for this man? Does the narrative manipulate the reader into a morally uncomfortable or even untenable position?

To feel that the account does Schloss and her fellow victims immense credit does not entail that the SS man is in any way worthy of their sympathy or fellow-feeling. Even so, it offers us no easy solutions: it forces the reader to consider that a human sympathy for the victim cannot necessarily be switched off even when the victim was, a few days earlier, one of the perpetrators. We may feel—as I do—that those who have not been victims have no right even to consider the possibility of pity for those who were perpetrators. But Schloss’s account reminds us that to be human is to be unable to switch our pity on and off at the behest of our moral judgments. The passage makes us uncomfortable, but it does not manipulate us. In “The Trip,” another short sequence in her memoir, Charlotte Delbo provides an account of a journey from Birkenau to Ravensbrück during which some fellow passengers were SS soldiers. Like Primo Levi, she is again curious about her oppressors.

Traveling along the tracks next to ours, a convoy of tanks and cannons passed us, eastward-bound. Our SS rise and explain, “Panzer divisions. On their way to Russia.”

I was dying to approach them, start a conversation, find out, as little as it was bound to be, what’s an SS. Why and how does one become an SS? The others go along with that. I go. They turn out to be Slovenes, forcibly enrolled in the SS. They say they know nothing about Auschwitz—all those smokestacks . . . Otherwise . . . They offer us cigarettes, light them for us. When we stop they go to the railway canteen, return with ersatz coffee
distributed by Red Cross nurses to the soldiers. We had never seen a look of pity or a human expression in the eyes of an SS. Do they strip off the assassin on departing from Auschwitz? (179, ellipses in original)

Delbo ends “The Trip” by reproducing without comment a newspaper account of the American William L. Calley’s “deep distress” on learning that a little Vietnamese girl for whom he had cared had escaped. Calley, at that time, was awaiting trial for having killed 109 Vietnamese civilians. The newspaper account sets Delbo’s questions in a certain relief, but it does not answer them.

Herman Kahan’s memoir The Fire and the Light contains a comparable anecdote. Kahan was brought up in a small Orthodox Jewish community in Romania and was a childhood friend of Elie Wiesel. When American troops liberated the Ebensee camp to which Kahan had been forced-marched from Auschwitz, he was naked in a truck loaded with bodies. Only because an American soldier saw some faint movement was he taken for treatment and saved. Having recuperated, he and three other survivors encounter a very frightened German soldier whom they drag into a house, strip, and again discover an SS tattoo. “With his hands folded, he pleaded and cried, ‘Mensch, ich habe eine Frau und Kinder.’” Kahan then takes command of the situation and allows the man to escape.

At first I did not want my friends to know that I had allowed an SS thug to escape. When they realized that this was the case, they were enraged. For a while it looked as though they would kill me instead of the German. They hit me and roughed me up, screaming at the top of their lungs that I was a traitor and a damned coward. In the midst of it all, I kept thinking, “Did I have the right to do this? He was one of the executioners.” I tried to defend myself but they would have none of my explanations. I agreed with them: an SS guard deserved death. They finally stopped, but I do not know if they ever forgave me. For some reason, my impulsive act became a turning point in my life. The obsessive thoughts, “Will I ever be a human being again? Will I ever be rid of my hatred?” began to lose their urgency. My depression began to ease, if only slightly, for the first time.

At least I was not party to a murder. The world had had enough murders. (128–29)

If as readers we approve of Kahan’s actions and of his much later assessment of them, how do we stand with regard to those survivors who did capture and kill SS guards? (Tadeusz Borowski’s chilling three-page story “Silence”
depicts such an event, contrasting the naïve innocence of the “young American officer” who appeals to the liberated prisoners not to take the law into their own hands but to deliver SS men to formal justice, with the determination of the men who, once the officer has left them, pull out their gagged and concealed prisoner and trample him to death.) How, we cannot help asking, could the SS man appeal to the four Jews as “Mensch” when the Nazis for decades had been insisting that they were not human, not “Mensch” at all? Must one get rid of hatred to regain a humanity that has been stolen from one? Are Kahan’s companions right to be outraged by his action? When the SS man addresses Kahan and his companions as “Mensch,” he admits that he knows and has always known that the Nazi view of the Jews is a lie. There is, too, a clear sense in Kahan’s account that his desire to be rid of his hatred is not one that focuses just on the interests of the SS man, but one that is also concerned with the re-establishment of his own full humanity.

4. Conclusion

The central conceit in Wilfred Owen’s poem “Strange Meeting,” written in the final year of the Great War, is that of a meeting in Hell between a soldier and the man he killed the day before. The killed man’s account, and his smile, assert and confirm their shared humanity, a commonality that renders absurd their murderous confrontation as members of opposing armies. In the passage I quote from Tolstoy, it is the man holding the power of life and death who perceives the humanity of his potential victim and thus allows both individuals to confront their shared humanity. Accounts of the Holocaust written by perpetrators have not, so far as I know, bequeathed us any comparable descriptions by the murderers of moments when, either during or after their genocidal acts, they recognized the humanity of the people they killed. In general, the perpetrators remain as much an enigma to us as they did to Primo Levi, who thought about Doktor Pannwitz “many times and in many ways” but who still wished to meet him again to satisfy his curiosity about him. Such a meeting was not to take place: as Levi reports in a list of answers to questions asked by his readers, when the Red Army was about to reach the Buna factory, Pannwitz “conducted himself like a bully and a coward,” “ordered his civilian collaborators to resist to the bitter end, forbade them to climb aboard the train leaving for the zones behind the Front, but jumped on himself at the last moment.” His escape won him little time: as Levi reports, he died in 1946 of a brain tumor (If This Is a Man 394). But had such a strange meeting ever taken place, it is surely unlikely that Levi’s curi-
osity would have been satisfied. The curiosity remains, however, as a token of that humanity which, against enormous odds, he retained.

Works Cited


