


**Ethics after Auschwitz:**

**The Holocaust in History and Representation**

To focus on the impact of an event (on poetry, on identity, on art and aesthetics) is to enter into a specific and important engagement with history, with the concept of “the past,” and with the nature of “event.” For Holocaust scholars, these issues are fraught: on the one hand, the Holocaust is the Nazi Judeocide that, in its most organized and deliberate form, began with the rise of the National Socialist Party and ended with the defeat of the Third Reich—the deportations, executions, forced labor, concentration camps, death camps, and general privation that claimed about six million Jewish lives. On the other hand, this stark description is almost overwhelmingly inadequate: as Susan Gubar puts it, “the calamitous effects of the Shoah spill over beyond the brackets provided by dates like 1933 and 1945, making it a continuing, lasting phenomenon, not a contained event but an unceasing series of casualties” (40). Although the Holocaust occurred in the past, it is not entirely of the past: in the work of mourning (individual and collective), as the wound of trauma (political and psychic) the Holocaust haunts the present; its challenge to narrative closure, aesthetic value, and discursive coherence emblematizes much of contemporary critical theory’s vexed relation with the process of representation. Consider, for instance, the myriad explanations and caveats evoked in attempts to name this event: while Auschwitz (a single concentration camp in occupied Poland, itself responsible for the deaths of one million Jews) often emblematizes the killings between 1933 and 1945, Holocaust, Shoah, Churban, genocide, and Judeocide are also applied, while some scholars prefer to refer only to “the event,” “the catastrophe,” or “the disaster.”

To approach the Holocaust’s impact, then, is to engage with a past that has not passed, an event that defies designation. This juxtaposition and interrelation of past and present pose crucial challenges to representation—if we include, in this term, the flickering recurrence of the past in the present as that past is re-presented—and to ethics: negotiating the potential of inaccurate or overly simplistic images to inflict harm on the past by dismissing the Holocaust’s scope or enormity or belittling its victims’ suffering. History, ethics, and representation are interrelated, and a concern with this interrelation and with
its implications for the present characterizes Michael Morgan’s *Beyond Auschwitz: Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought in America*, Susan Gubar’s *Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew*, and Berel Lang’s *Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics.*

These books emerge from different disciplines (theology, Jewish studies, literary criticism, philosophy, and aesthetics) but converge as they focus on the Holocaust—not as an object of study in itself but in its impact on the contemporary. Morgan traces how the Holocaust moved to a position of centrality in American Jewish self-consciousness, examining how certain Jewish theological thinkers from the mid-1960s to the 1980s—Richard Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim, Irving Greenberg, Eliezer Berkovits, and Arthur Cohen—engaged the Holocaust in their writings on Jewish identity. Gubar identifies and delineates a tradition of Holocaust poetry written in English by non-survivors—a tradition that displays a consistent engagement with and reaffirmation of Adorno’s famous statement that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” And Berel Lang reflects on the complex interrelation of ethics and art in light of the Holocaust, an event of “moral enormity” (18) that forces a rethinking of art, ethics, and representation and its limits. Each of these books is concerned with how we represent the Holocaust in a post-Holocaust world; for these authors, the Holocaust emerges and reemerges as we explain it to ourselves and ourselves to ourselves in its wake.

For Michael Morgan, the presence of the Holocaust in the past poses a fundamental ethical injunction to the present: the historical fact of the Holocaust, says Morgan, poses certain “demands” on the post-Holocaust era, and from the mid-1960s to the 1980s “Jewish religious thought . . . was dominated by the demands of Auschwitz and what seemed to follow from those demands” (3). Each of the theologians Morgan studies asks this question: Given the historical fact of the Holocaust, should Jewish identity transcend history or be overwhelmed by it? In answering this question the theologians are required to situate themselves ethically in relation to the Holocaust: to transcend history runs the risk of dismissing the momentous nature of this cataclysmic event; to be overwhelmed by it risks submitting to the evil the Holocaust represents, abandoning fundamental tenets of Jewish faith and rejecting Jewish particularity, or what Morgan calls an “authentic” or “genuinely Jewish” identity (50)—essentially, awarding Hitler a posthumous victory in his war against the Jews. As they negotiate these options, the thinkers Morgan studies engage in a complex interrelation between the transcendent nature of religious faith and the bleak factuality of the historical event.

For Richard Rubenstein, for example, the presence of the Holocaust in history dictates that Jewish identity be conceived as the product of and response to historical processes, a conception that requires revision and, ultimately, rejection of traditional religious discourse. In Morgan’s summary of Rubenstein’s argument, Auschwitz “shocks and horrifies; it moves us to try to
understand what the event means, how it might be assimilated to religious categories and to sociopolitical, historical frameworks. When we do this, we find that the religious terms are repulsive, while the naturalist accounts reveal something useful and informative about our world and our religious life in it" (107). According to this concept, which Rubenstein terms “Jewish paganism,” Auschwitz catapults theology into history; in the wake of the Holocaust, Jewish identity needs to perceive itself as historically formed and situated. Eliezer Berkovits, on the other hand, accepts Auschwitz’s historical influence but maintains that Jewish beliefs and doctrines retain their ahistorical nature. For Berkovits, says Morgan, “Auschwitz provides a historically particular standard for the character of faith. . . . What Auschwitz does not do, however, is pose a new problem for Jewish theological self-understanding” (119). Berkovits’s achievement, according to Morgan, is his recognition that “Auschwitz leaves faith untouched, at the same time that it decisively affects the life of faith”—a recognition that is an expression of “a serious problem”: Berkovits’s “allegiance to an ahistorical set of Jewish beliefs and doctrines and his honest and deep sensitivity to the victims of Nazi criminality” (120).

As the thinkers he discusses negotiate the need to recognize the historical fact of the Holocaust and the plight of its victims, on the one hand, and an equally compelling need to maintain, or reclaim, a coherent notion of Jewish identity that preceded, endured, and succeeds the Holocaust, on the other, it is the recognition of this paradox that Morgan seems to privilege. He is critical of Rubenstein’s radical historicity and sympathetic to Berkovits’s wrestling with the nature of faith. Ultimately Morgan’s allegiance seems to lie most strongly with Emil Fackenheim’s concept of post-Holocaust Jewish theology that dwells in the uncertainty and ambiguity of the relation between the historical and the transcendental (here defined in terms of the Jewish people’s relation to God), “a recovery of tradition [that] is also fragmentary and at risk . . . both an effort at mending and an act of t’shuvah, of return to the past that is also a return to the God of the past” (194).

_Beyond Auschwitz_ describes the work of these theologians in great depth and with immense sympathy, but Morgan’s assessment of the impact of their work on American Jewish thought is somewhat hobbled by his own privileging of the Holocaust as central to Jewish identity and Jewish history. Richard Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim, Irving Greenberg, Eliezer Berkovits, and Arthur Cohen were, Morgan argues, too casually dismissed by scholars and leaders of the American Jewish community who aligned them with popular responses and therefore underrated the sophistication of their engagement with the implications of the Holocaust for Jewish identity. But Morgan’s own assumption of the Holocaust’s centrality to this identity too strongly informs his assessment of this reception. Those who dismissed the post-Holocaust thinkers, Morgan argues, “did not accept this hermeneutical centrality for the Holocaust” (199), and Morgan concludes that “what was denied [by those
who dismissed the post-Holocaust thinkers] was that historically Auschwitz
was undeniable” (199). This tautology (“what was denied was that Auschwitz
was undeniable”) detaches Morgan’s careful readings of post-Holocaust think-
ers from their own historical context: the issue becomes one of incommensu-
rable assumptions about the centrality of the Holocaust rather than an effective
assessment of post-Holocaust thought and its role in American Judaism.

Susan Gubar’s elegant and eloquent Poetry after Auschwitz is subtitled “re-
membering what one never knew.” Gubar echoes Morgan’s partiality to para-
dox, as the tension between knowledge and its absence, memory and its
inevitable distortions, informs this work. “The Holocaust,” says Gubar, “is
dying” as it moves into the past, with the aging of survivors, in the silence of
denial or of misguided awe, and by its co-option by “facile or banal recon-
structions that fashioned the past to suit ideological and economic agendas of
the present” (5). Gubar also echoes Morgan’s assumption that the Holocaust
poses ethical demands on the present as she states that “those of us who know
that the Holocaust is dying should discern the ways it can be recognized and
felt in the present; we must keep it alive as dying” (7). Poetry, she claims, is in
a unique position to do so. Because it eschews narrative coherence, because it
communicates without claiming to comprehend, and because it poses a crucial
and fundamental challenge to narrative logic, poetry can create a space in
which the historical fact of the Holocaust—its self of the past—can be main-
tained in living memory: “Like symptoms in the aftermath of trauma, lyrical
utterance often announces itself as an involuntary return to intense feelings
about an incomprehensible moment. But recollected in relative safety, if not
tranquility, such a moment rendered in writing allows authors and readers to
grapple with the consequences of traumatic pain without being silenced by
it” (8).

Poetry after Auschwitz is the first sustained study of that unique tradition,
poetry about the Holocaust written in English by non-survivors. The authors
Gubar studies encounter the Holocaust through various levels of mediation:
time, loss, experience, and language; their work both sustains the past and un-
derscores its pastness, mourns loss while evoking the irrecoverable, under-
scores the inaccessibility of the victims’ experience while keeping that
experience in view, and consistently questions the ability of language to nego-
tiate these paradoxes. Though Gubar does not say so specifically, three central
devices seem to inform this tradition: poets after Auschwitz confront their own
position as poets and highlight the challenge that the Holocaust poses to aes-
thetic expression, foregrounding “the inadequacy of the poetic imagination”
and “making the reader fully aware of their own suspicions about the aesthet-
icizing in which they engage” (20, 64); they underscore the inaccessibility of
the object of representation to the process of representation itself, “stress[ing]
their oblique access to remote events” or remembering the dead “in a way that
preserves the vexed and finally incomprehensible circumstances of their
dying” (22, 54); and they lay bare the device by which they engage in this work, “put[ting] on display the tension between historical reference and imaginative figuration” or “highlight[ing] the necessity of documenting the otherwise unimaginable and the difficulty of doing so, the need to put in its place merely belated, fractured, indecipherable versions of an often enigmatic reality” (27, 102).

By articulating and questioning their own situatedness, their ability to access the event, and the devices by which they do so, the poets Gubar discusses confirm the tension between historical particularity and its reverberations in the contemporary, and situate themselves ethically vis-à-vis this tension by enshrining its paradoxicality. One way they do so is by “embed[ding] visual and auditory documents into verse that attests to the futility of the poet’s imaginative task” (98). In a chapter titled “About Pictures Out of Focus,” for example, Gubar describes the various ways these poets place photography (with its connotations of realist documentation) into dialogue with the poetic language that photographic images both challenge and confirm. In a fascinating discussion of ecphrasis (a literary technique involving the verbal description of a visual work), Gubar traces how post-Holocaust poets in English utilize the technique of describing photographs—meditating on all-too-familiar images or evoking achingly absent ones—a technique that enables these poets to produce “the discontinuity that calls out for, yet refutes the explanatory language of the poem” (106).

It bears mention, however, that Gubar’s observations about post-Holocaust poetry are determinative as well as descriptive. Because of the relative paucity of critical attention to many of the poems Gubar discusses (one wishes for an anthology to accompany, or closely follow, her book) and because, as she puts it, this body of work constitutes a unique tradition that has yet to receive the kind of sustained scrutiny she grants it, Gubar is in the position of creating the tradition she examines. She specifies her criterion for inclusion as a rigorous engagement with “aesthetic, ethical and historical inquiry”—a choice that leads her to exclude “many volumes of verse composed as a therapeutic response to the catastrophe, as heartfelt and personal reactions to the disaster” (xvii). As she privileges the formal techniques of proxy-witnessing, anamnesis, antimorphosis, and prosopopoeia, Gubar is not just establishing a tradition but defining a genre. And because the Holocaust, says Gubar, “cannot be taken into consciousness through the usual models of comparison, parallelism, symmetry, similitude, metaphor, resemblance, correspondence” (98), Poetry after Auschwitz privileges “hesitant, stymied, stalled words [that] relinquish the hope of closure or finality” over less formally sophisticated poetry that Gubar designates, reluctantly, “banal” (24). Implicitly if not explicitly, then, Poetry after Auschwitz identifies aesthetic complexity as an index of ethical commitment: “the most scrupulous of the poets,” writes Gubar, “strive to braid their
and our apprehensions of the Shoah with an earlier generation's memories of a history that continues to demand a personal, ethical response" (23), and the ellipses and breaches generated by this endeavor "characterize the humility of literary men and women aware of the oxymoronic nature of the very idea of 'Shoah-verse'"—a term that Gubar deems "obscene" (26).

If, in *Beyond Auschwitz*, Morgan's assumption of the Holocaust's centrality to history is so crucial that it ultimately becomes the final criterion for examining and assessing the work of Jewish theologians in America, *Poetry after Auschwitz* expands this assumption and applies it to the work of representation: for Gubar, reflecting this centrality while maintaining history's inaccessibility is the definition of ethical aesthetics. In *Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics*, Berel Lang addresses this interrelation of history, ethics, and representation directly, positing the vexed relation between representation and history as an explicitly ethical challenge that the presence of the Holocaust in history poses to representation in general, aesthetics in particular. Lang's foundational assumption is that "the character of a subject or topic will, and should, have some direct bearing on the form of its expression" (x), and he argues that in the context of the Holocaust's "moral enormity," establishing and enforcing limits of representation take on the dimensions of ethical action. Referring to legal prohibition of Holocaust denial in some European countries, for example, Lang suggests that the "moral basis of such legislation" (which he considers "substantial") "applies . . . with only slight alteration not only to Holocaust denial but to Holocaust distortion, to Holocaust diminution, to Holocaust titillation, to Holocaust kitsch" (31).

Lang's argument, then, advances the somewhat paradoxical view that although the Holocaust in itself does not pose limits to representation (he argues strenuously against the notion that the Holocaust is "unspeakable," "incomprehensible," "indescribable," or "ineffable"), artistic representations of this event are enjoined to treat it as if it did. Concurrently, however, Lang appeals to limits of representation, locating these limits not in the object of representation but in the context in which that representation functions: "almost everybody . . . can name some examples of Holocaust representation that seem to them to warrant such criticism [that they 'deform' or 'debase' or 'diminish the Holocaust']," writes Lang, and "this finding is itself strong evidence, more than only prima facie, of the limits posited around the representations of this event." While "such limits are often vague or unarticulated," he concludes, this "is less to the point than that they are appealed to and applied: it is the assumption of their relevance that is decisive" (6).

The argument that limits of representation exist because people appeal to them echoes strangely in the ears of those who are accustomed to rigorous critiques of such foundationalist (or fundamentalist) claims. And yet this is the logic that underlines Lang's argument, in which representation's responsibility
to its object (in this case, the Holocaust) oscillates with representation's responsibility to its audience (the social context into which art enters and functions). Both cases presume that representation per se possesses some degree of agency that is, or can be, "responsible," and the Holocaust's "moral enormity" is appealed to in order to evoke a sense of agency, if not a definition of it. The question, then, arises: in the case of the Holocaust, who (or what) possesses the agency to which responsibility may be ascribed? If Holocaust representation requires an ethical context, who—or what—is required to act in an ethical manner?

The answer lies in the final pages, in which Lang champions for general moral principles against the individual, situational ethics of postmodernity, effectively removing the burden of representation's responsibility from representation itself and situating it in the ahistorical realm of moral principles. "Perhaps," Lang suggests, "it is the desire for explanations of the moral continuum that is the problem, not the constant failure to find it and the new pangs of conscience that such failures then add" (157). Advocating such a moral continuum produces, for Lang, a concept of "post-Holocaust understanding" as a return to and enhancement of "pre-Holocaust understanding" (157), an ill-disguised attack on what is generally (and simplistically) denigrated as postmodern relativism in the name of ahistorical moral certitude and unapologetic assumption of access to reality.

Lang is ultimately concerned with the issue of, as he puts it, "judging and discriminating among Holocaust images in terms of their aesthetic, historical, and moral qualities" (10), and the spectre of Plato's Republic that such judgment evokes is not accidental. In the case of the Holocaust (and, Lang suggests, more generally) "is" merges with "ought," epistemology with ontology; thus "how the Holocaust can be represented" merges with "how it ought to be" (4). The civic and aesthetic implications of such merging are evident; more significant are its historical and ethical consequences, as factuality ("is") combined with obligation ("ought") controls both access to history and responsibility for it, wedding verifiability to morality. "If ever facts have spoken for themselves, this is the case for the body of fact surrounding the Holocaust," writes Lang (11), and he goes on to argue that representations of the Holocaust need to acknowledge the primacy of such facts over and above their inevitable distortion by representation: "there are undoubtedly many directions to which reflection or memory or the imagination may turn in the aftermath of the Holocaust, but the one direction on which any such movement is dependent is in knowing and following the contours of what that event was, as it was and how it came to be. And that dependence, which on the face of it is both logical and chronological, in my view also attests to a moral order" (11).

If, as the subtitle of Holocaust Representation indicates, Lang opens his discussion by situating "art within the limits of history and ethics," he concludes
by identifying history as ethics and by identifying art’s “responsibility” as reinforcing the merging of “is” with “ought.” This is a limited role indeed, but an understandable one given how, as we saw, to focus on the impact of an event is to enter into a specific and important engagement with history and with its re-presentation in the present. Lang’s Holocaust Representation illustrates just why these issues are so fraught for Holocaust scholars: the relation of representation to morality is echoed in Gubar’s characterization of the “genre” of Holocaust writing as an ethical engagement with history—this “genre,” writes Lang, is “rooted in its moral connection to the writing of history” (20). Morgan’s dedication to the Holocaust’s centrality to this history (a dedication that forces a tautology into his argument) echoes Lang’s positing history as Holocaust representations’ final determinant: for Lang, in the case of the Holocaust, “history functions both as an occasion—that is, as a subject and incentive—and also as an end” (20).

For Morgan, for Gubar and for Lang, then, the interrelation of history, representation, and ethics is manifested in this mantra: to lose sight of history, to let its re-presentation in the present obscure its presence in the past, is to be, simply, unethical. Hence, for Lang, this primacy of historical factuality takes the form of an ethical injunction, however obscurely worded: “there is a strong sense in which the chronicle of the Holocaust—the rudimentary details of the answers to the questions of who, what, and when—remains at the center and as a test of whatever else is constructed on them. Both as a matter of fact and as a matter of justice” (13). Hence, too, Gubar’s identification of aesthetic complexity as an indicator of ethical and historical engagement that leads her to pose the “rigor” and “vigilance” evinced by post-Holocaust artists as criteria with which to distinguish between “honorable and dishonorable representations of the Holocaust” (57–58). In Morgan’s case, this ethical injunction may be the origin of the appeals to “honesty,” “genuineness,” and “authenticity,” appeals that so saturate his analysis that some parts of Beyond Auschwitz read more like a paean to integrity than an academic inquiry: “their attempts to grapple honestly and profoundly with the Holocaust lead [post-Holocaust thinkers] to consider at a fundamental level the very nature of religious thought in general and Jewish belief in particular... they are driven by a sense of utter honesty and genuineness... they recognize that an honest encounter with the Holocaust demands a sense of discontinuity or rupture with the past and yet, at the very same time, a sense of continuity or accessibility... their commitments to fidelity and honesty are especially powerful” (6–7; see also 210).

What is the source of this mantra? Why, for these authors, does the interrelation of history, representation, and ethics take this particular form? For Morgan, Gubar, and Lang, the sense that maintaining the primacy of the past to its re-presentation in the present is an ethical act is predicated on the assumption that the Holocaust cannot, should not, must not fade from view or
be subsumed into or by the past. That assumption itself bears close scrutiny—tensions between the past and its representation are hardly unique to the Holocaust. And yet, Morgan, Gubar, and Lang do proceed from the fundamental assumption (an assumption that, in the context of the Holocaust, is generally taken as a given) that this particular moment in history constitutes some kind of break, rupture, or breach, with crucial implications for culture "after Auschwitz." Any attempt to generate continuity between the Holocaust and what follows it implies one of two options—negotiating this breach (which implicitly affirms it) or dismissing it—and the authors discussed here align themselves with the former. Morgan refers to the Holocaust as "an epoch-making event," "particular, unprecedented and important" (198, 199). Gubar expands this centrality: the Third Reich inaugurated a linguistic crisis; the Shoah inaugurated a cognitive one (10, 12); both crises generate a distrust of narrative closure to which poetry is in a unique position to attend, "to underscore the central significance of what is deemed to be a decisive convulsion in culture" (11). Lang, who denies that the Holocaust is inherently unique or unrepresentable, nonetheless awards it a singular position, as "the problem of Holocaust representation...[warrants] attention to an extent commanded by few other contemporary or past historical events" (x); "the Holocaust as a subject of representation makes unusual demands in its role as a subject of discourse" (47); Holocaust images are subject to "unusual pressure," and in the case of the Holocaust, the limits of representation have "a special force" (x–xi).

It bears mention that for Morgan, Gubar, and Lang the assumption of the Holocaust's centrality to history does not function as an argument for the uniqueness of Jewish experience or for the privileging of Jewish suffering. It does, however, authorize and inform the tensions between the past and the present, the historical event and its representation, that I have been describing. Assuming that the Holocaust is, somehow, central to history accords the Holocaust some degree of incommensurability that needs to be acknowledged before it can (if indeed it should) be surpassed. Proponents of Holocaust sacralization like Elie Wiesel reify this incommensurability, positing it as an ethical injunction that is analogous with a divine decree (the second commandment, to be precise); Morgan, Gubar, and Lang, however, perceive this resistance as a potentially productive space, and their studies of the Holocaust's impact on Jewish identity, poetic language, and aesthetic work take the form of delineating the implications and products of such engagement. In other words, like the tension between the specific historical event and its reverberations in the contemporary, the tension between the uniqueness of the Holocaust and its empirical presence in human history is posited as both a paradox to be acknowledged and a challenge to be met. But when Morgan refers to Holocaust suffering as "unimaginable" (6), when Gubar states bleakly that "the Holocaust is like nothing else" (98), a "phenomenon that still defies
understanding" (8), and when Lang posits that "traditional forms ... are quite inadequate" for Holocaust images (10), each is expressing a resistance to perceiving the Holocaust through established, conventional, and unproblematized frames of reference, and their subsequent treatment of Holocaust representation endows this resistance with an ethical quality. In this way, the books discussed here reiterate the Holocaust's incommensurability implicitly, while explicitly they deny it.

If "ethics after Auschwitz" rings strangely in our ears, it is not because the immensity of Holocaust destruction overshadows the possibility, or potential value, of ethical action. Such strangeness more likely emerges from the assumption of the Holocaust's incommensurability, an assumption that dictates a principle of representation that detaches the Holocaust from the historical and situational context which defines ethics per se (ethics is, after all, a practice and not a principle). In other words, though each of these authors emphasizes the necessity of perpetual engagement with the Holocaust, and each balks at the notion that the Holocaust is ahistorical and hence cannot be subject to historical scrutiny (if anything, they privilege such scrutiny), their definition of the Holocaust as a rupture or break, as unprecedented, special, unusual, or unique, ultimately undermines their efforts to generate continuity between the present and the past. If the Holocaust is to continue to function as an object of study, if its presence in the past is to continue to inflect and infect the present, the notion—however limited—of its incommensurability needs to be critically addressed. Such critique may well be the work that ethics after Auschwitz ought to undertake.

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Professor Turner's valuable study of the intersection of sexual and political culture during the Civil War, Interregnum, and reign of Charles II focuses on the European evolution of pornography and its relationship to women's attempts to achieve both literary and social power. Examining a wide range of "porno-political" texts, practices, and preoccupations, Turner demonstrates the cultural importance of a pornographic discourse normally marginalized and shows how it provides an important register of both political and sexual attitudes and practices.