



**HISTORY, LITERATURE, CRITICAL THEORY**

Dominick LaCapra

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HISTORY  
LITERATURE  
CRITICAL  
THEORY

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*For Jane, Molly, and Véronique*

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*The ghost of Roger Casement is beating at the door*  
—William Butler Yeats

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## Introduction

This book begins with a frame essay on the general problem of relating history, literature (specifically the novel), and critical theory. This topic is vast, and my approach is selective. But the manner in which problems are addressed has more general implications for relating history and literature as well as historical and literary analysis. At issue is how best to elaborate a form of inquiry where history and literature are brought into mutually provocative contact—where historical understanding is challenged by critical (including literary) theories, and literary criticism is not only informed but insistently interrogated by historical questions.

My focus in the discussion of history is on violence, with particular attention to the Nazi genocide or “final solution.” More generally, I am interested in the nexus linking the sublime, the sacred, the “postsecular,” and a variable quest for a redemptive absolute, as well as possible implications of such a quest for violent and at times sacrificial or quasi-sacrificial practices involving radical transgression, scapegoating, and victimization.<sup>1</sup> As the dubious dimensions of these initiatives become more evident in the wake of catastrophic events, the quest may be emptied of content, purely formal or perplexingly opaque, a quest for a quest that nonetheless may be presented in extreme terms prompting a leap into the unknown or an empty utopianism, at times attended by violence as valorized practice or rite of passage.<sup>2</sup> In certain theoretical discourses, the very term “violence” becomes like a perfunctory seasoning that peppers any and every allusion—to language, to affect, to change, to relationships, and to putative origins.

One objective of this book is to foster thinking about the increasingly prevalent but ill-defined notion of the postsecular, a term that may perhaps be best “defined” by its various settings and contextual uses and abuses.<sup>3</sup> This multidimensional, contested notion arises in the wake of debate about secularization, which often stressed either the continuity of the religious and the secular or the radical break between them, as many defenses of the Enlightenment tend to do,<sup>4</sup> notably in attempting to establish the “legitimacy of the modern age.”<sup>5</sup> The most thought-provoking approaches to problems bearing on the postsecular are, I think, those that point to an intricate understanding of displacement involving both repetition and change, at times traumatic change (at least for those undergoing a crisis or even a loss of faith, epitomized in the “death of God” or in the way religious language, such as prayer, becomes incoherent or unavailable).<sup>6</sup> To the extent that a notion of the “postsecular” is at play in the work of figures such as J. M. Coetzee and W. G. Sebald (as well as Jacques Derrida), it is in this complicated sense. (To the best of my knowledge, none of them uses the term.) It is also interesting

note that Hans Blumenberg, despite his emphasis on the discontinuity between the premodern and the modern, directed against a “secularization thesis” stressing continuity, develops a concept of “reoccupation” whereby sites and even conceptual or imaginary spaces that were formerly invested by religion (a chapel or church, for example) may come to acquire “secular” functions that nonetheless remain imbued with sacral dimensions. And running counter to his insistence elsewhere on epistemological breaks between historical periods, Michel Foucault as well, in his 1961 *Folie déraison: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique*, employs at crucial junctures a model of repetition with change, referring, for example, to the relation between premodern unreason and modern madness in terms of “torsions in the same anxiety” and indicating, for example, the manner in which leprosariums when converted into insane asylums nonetheless produced intense concern as loci of contamination and possible contagion.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, one may mention the way the French Revolution gave rise to feast days, a new calendar, and a quasi-sacred liturgy of celebrations as well as quasi-sacrificial violence during the Reign of Terror.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, once the notion of the postsecular arises, one is inclined belatedly to see earlier phenomena and texts in its light (for example, the works of certain Romantics, such as Wordsworth, Friedrich Schlegel, or Novalis, which might not be explicitly “religious” in any conventional sense. A touchstone would be Wordsworth’s “Ode. Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.”)<sup>9</sup>

I think that, in the course of this book, my own subject-position with respect to the “postsecular” may be characterized as open-minded, or at least nondismissive, yet at times questioning. (A mode of the postsecular of which I remain critical is that which appeals to a variant of the sacrificial and its supposed regenerative or redemptive powers, involving some form of victimization or scapegoating.) One of the most difficult, fraught terms and problems in this respect is of course the “Holocaust” itself, which often moves in the space between the postsecular and the more manifestly religious (evoking sacral or even sacrificial connotations, for example, as a *tremendum* whose victims were martyrs). Certain discussions of the Holocaust may insist on its uniqueness even while acknowledging the extremity of other events or processes. Because of its possibly sacrificial connotations and its etymology as a burnt offering, the term Holocaust may be avoided, as it is emphatically by Giorgio Agamben and in a more subdued manner by figures such as W. G. Sebald and Saul Friedländer.<sup>10</sup>

I hesitantly use the term “Holocaust” and address issues related to it, especially toward the end of this book, with the stipulation that the term is problematic, that it should not be fixated on but used along with other terms (such as Shoah, Nazi genocide, and “final solution”), that most people in the recent past probably use it not because of sacral or sacrificial connotations but because it is the term current in their culture, and that this very usage may help wear away any residual sacral or sacrificial dimensions that are questionable. Even the appeal to uniqueness may be defensible not in an universal or absolute sense but contextually and with qualifications in situations where it may counter tendencies toward denial or normalization, as was the case during the 1986 *Historikerstreit*, an important reference point for the thought of Friedländer and to some extent of Sebald. Moreover, the special, non-numerical sense of “unique” might be to refer, however tentatively, to that which is so extreme and unsettling that it somehow stands out however many times it may or may not occur.<sup>11</sup> But my more basic point is that, with respect to the Nazi genocide and to other genocides as well, one is on contested ground, and there are no innocent or unproblematic terms, certainly not “final solution” which is always to be used or at least understood in scare quotes as a Nazi, neutralizing, bureaucratic term that one invokes only *faute de mieux*. There may also be an important sense in which “uniqueness” is not a significant issue and may even have become diversionary in that the most important concern is to investigate the course of the Nazi genocide and to analyze it in noninvidious terms with respect to other genocides or forms of extreme violence and victimization, raising the question of how to account for various subject-positions and possibilities of transformation with

respect to understanding, responding to, and attempting to address certain extreme phenomena that may raise intractable problems. Indeed the “Holocaust” and its various uses and abuses should be something that makes one especially wary (although not dismissive) about appeals to the postsecular and what they may entail or, however unintentionally, validate.

A key problem in relation to literature is how to account in a nonreductive manner for its relation to history, a relation that may be best formulated in terms of a process of mutual interrogation, pressure, and provocation. The following chapters explore this relation, including discussions of Joseph Conrad, Gustave Flaubert, J. M. Coetzee, W. G. Sebald, Jonathan Littell, Saul Friedländer, and Jacques Derrida. I take the discussion of Derrida into an analysis of fascism and especially Nazism, a topic that preoccupied Derrida himself toward the end of his life but that he did not explicitly relate to his reflections on religion and the sacred. Friedländer, a historian, has often been praised on stylistic grounds and even hailed as developing a new “literary” approach to the problem of “representing” the voices of victims of the “final solution.” Derrida is, of course, often seen as a “literary” philosopher, one who both stresses the importance of literature for the investigation of philosophical problems and who writes in an unorthodox style that has a seemingly literary quality or impetus. For many he transgresses or blurs the boundary between the literary and the philosophical as well as other “fields” including the historical. He has been criticized if not execrated by philosophers, for example, Jürgen Habermas, who in this respect joins many in the analytic tradition such as Ruth Barcan Marcus.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Derrida is praised or emulated by many in literary and continental philosophical circles, including probably his two primary disciples or interlocutors, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.<sup>13</sup> Derrida’s appearance in the last chapter of this book, which has a more historical and decidedly critical-theoretical emphasis than the other chapters, should not be surprising.

Violence and fascism, more specifically Nazism, are also topics related to the work of W. G. Sebald, who lived in the melancholic aftermath of the Nazi genocide. This genocide and its aftermath are a concern of J. M. Coetzee, but in his work apartheid arguably has an analogous place as a historical phenomenon that exerted pressure on his writing and exists as an oppressive force field even in texts where he does not explicitly address it (as he does to some extent in *Disgrace*). Of course, disastrous events and melancholic aftermaths have proliferated in the recent past to such an extent that the contexts pertinent to the work of any given writer are blatantly overdetermined. Although Flaubert and Conrad wrote well before the catastrophic events of the more recent past, the excessive and even genocidal dimension of colonialism is evoked in *Heart of Darkness*, explicitly in Kurtz’s infamous words: “Exterminate all the brutes.” And the narrator in Flaubert’s works, including *Madame Bovary*, seems to have genocidal or at least nihilistic tendencies in his desire to negate and transcend an ugly, mediocre, unlivable bourgeois reality. Such, at least, was Sartre’s contention in his monumental *L’idiot de la famille (The Family Idiot)*.<sup>14</sup>

The mutual relation between history and literature tends to be disavowed or misconstrued in various approaches that I investigate in the first chapter: a contextual reductionism in which literature becomes a function explained by one or another set of contextual forces (such as capitalism, colonialism, or the autonomization of spheres in modernity); an ultraformalistic conception of the literary for which history is ultimately irrelevant or becomes at best mere raw material, background, or ballast; and “high theory” (or “theoreticism”) that goes beyond necessary speculation and uses both literature and history simply as illustrations or more or less fleeting touchdown points for its transhistorical, if not quasi-transcendental, claims.<sup>15</sup> Such a transhistorical perspective arises not only in the work of figures such as Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek but even at times in the self-understanding and novelistic practice of certain writers such as Jonathan Littell and, arguably, W. G. Sebald, where a transhistorical fatalism may seem pronounced or even, as in Littell, assume a mythological or metahistorical cast.<sup>16</sup> Yet how to trace the intricate, variable, at times



bewildering relations between history and literature, while being attentive to contextual pressures as well as to the role of literary form and deformation, is an admittedly difficult undertaking where the promise of success cannot be the primary motivation for making the attempt.<sup>17</sup>

One motif in this book is the importance of transgressive excess and its relation to a quest that the modern period tends to become empty and may veer in the direction of a participatory fascination with, if not celebratory apology for, violence, itself at times seen as a regenerative, transfiguring, redemptive force in history. I have intimated that, especially insofar as any specific objective or revolutionary subject seems increasingly unavailable, the quest itself may turn into a metaquest or a quest for a quest, perhaps eventuating in a blank utopianism that provokes a desire for radical transcendence or transformation in a willing suspension of disbelief concerning where it may lead. This quest may take on postsecular or quasi-religious overtones and resonate with negative theology or with something that seems imperceptibly close to it. Such a quest took a specific, violent, genocidal form in Nazism, which may at times have uncanny echoes or resonances in other quests that should not be identified with it and, however contestably or ineffectively, may even resist or criticize it.

What may perhaps be termed a postsecular, if not a more explicitly religious or theological orientation has at times been seen in the work (notably the later work) of Jacques Derrida, who himself attempted to engage in a critique of fascism, and especially Nazism.<sup>18</sup> One of the most intriguing general phenomena of recent literary criticism and critical theory is the way Derrida's discourse has captured the imagination and inflected the style of a significant sector of the academic and literary community (including a writer such as J. M. Coetzee, at least on a certain level). The turn to (as well as the almost visceral turn away from) Derrida has involved not only strategies of textual reading and the role of complex (non)concepts such as *différance* or the trace, along with a propensity for enigmatic, paradoxical, at times mind-boggling formulations. It has also engendered an intense mimetic relation to Derrida's own idiosyncratic style, which might even be seen, in a nondisparaging sense, as a kind of linguistic analog of a computer virus. Or, to change the metaphor, Derrida's style gets under your skin in both the positive and negative senses of that colloquial expression. Moreover, those looking to Derrida may track and follow his interest in various topics, texts, and orientations, resulting in a situation in which a move by Derrida generated—and even after his death may still generate—a cottage industry around one of his concerns (the origin of language, supplementarity, the aporia, the uncanny, the “critique of violence,” generosity, the totally other, the autoimmune, the literary, and so forth).

The foregoing series signals that Derrida's role has indeed been pronounced in literary studies which may even have its problems or lines of analysis directed by questions he enunciates and explores.<sup>19</sup> More generally, the lines between literature and philosophy have become indeterminate and not blurred, and even those who insist on the specificity or even sui generis status of the literary “such” (such as Derek Attridge, for example, in his important study of Coetzee) tend paradoxically to see the literary in terms largely shaped by a certain approach to philosophy (in Attridge's case, Derrida's).<sup>20</sup> As I have intimated, these terms have themselves recently become increasingly postsecular with a problematic relation to religion, thus repeating on a spectral or phantomlike level the traditional relation between philosophy and theology, with this relation becoming more explicit in the recent past. A text in which the postsecular turn in Derrida seems especially pronounced is his “Faith and Knowledge: Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone.”<sup>21</sup> I begin chapter 1 with a brief, highly selective discussion of this text and then go in directions not pursued by Derrida (although he does pursue them elsewhere in his own way)—directions that take me back to issues circulating around the problem of fascism and Nazism.

Another phenomenon in the recent past, accentuated by the death of Derrida and other major figures, is the rise to prominence in theoretical circles of Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek.

Žižek, who have almost become the “ABZs” of contemporary critical theory. Žižek arguably has achieved pride of place in this threesome, at least in terms of the frequency of references to him and his publications, which have taken on a very significant role in the work of literary critics with a avowed interest in politics. Despite his encompassing interests, Žižek’s primary focus has been on film and modes of popular culture, along with at times arresting forays into history and politics. Yet his prominence as a theorist has inspired others, including those who do focus on literature. In the first chapter, I briefly discuss Paul Eisenstein’s noteworthy “Žižekian” study, *Traumatic Encounter: Holocaust Representation and the Hegelian Subject*.<sup>22</sup> And, as an epilog, I include a discussion of Žižek, focusing on his influential treatment of violence that combines political advocacy, literary flair, and rhetorical flamboyance. For many, Žižek is a very “exciting” writer (and speaker), if not what the French would term an “*exalté*.”

Among my concerns are the ways literature inscribes, at times by resisting, contextual forces and historical constraints; indeed in certain respects it may actively disorient reference or attempt to transcend contexts. This sometimes unsettling initiative (as in Derrida or, in a different register, Flaubert or, say, Samuel Beckett) may involve a practice of insistent decontextualization that seems to place the bewildered reader on a barren lunar landscape or in a desert where s/he is invited to wander blindly, devoid of a sense of direction or a goal. In seemingly less uncanny or disorienting forms, the relation of text and context may enact reversals and run from quotidian happenings in the French provinces (experienced by Emma Bovary, and perhaps rendered by the Flaubert-narrator, as ultimately deadly) to the unfolding and aftermath of genocide. It is, for example, noteworthy that a telling reversal in *Madame Bovary* is the manner in which the fictitious towns of Tostes and Yonville-l’Abbaye are extensively described in “realistic” terms, while the real city of Rouen is barely sketched and Paris, the center of Emma’s dreams and hopes, remains a vague, suicidally inflected ideal—an analog of her elusive ideal lover. One may also find in certain tendencies, including what has been seen as a form of “modernism,” a preference for suggestive allusiveness or perplexing vagueness that may situate context or setting in a twilight zone, if not a “heart of darkness,” and render uncertain an ascription of a referential context or decided point of view (such as racism or misogyny). More generally, underspecification may be an explicit strategy of representation, and it has many possible functions from evasiveness and equivocation to the provocative implication of the reader in the problems being explored. Another way the reader’s expectations may be upset, at least with respect to understanding and meaning, is through a surfeit of context or historical and pseudohistorical detail, a practice (or at least an effect) of certain of Flaubert’s novels (notably *Salammbô*) and in evidence in Littell’s monstrously, and at times repulsively detailed, seemingly historical novel, *Les Bienveillants* (*The Kindly Ones*).<sup>23</sup>

The uses of language or, more generally, signifying practices should be taken as an important historical problem as well as an object of literary and rhetorical study. Despite the much heralded, more rarely practiced, and often reductively construed “linguistic turn,” historiography may still not give sufficient attention to the problem of language-in-use as a prominent object of inquiry, and this is one reason why much history does not include sustained, careful attention either to the historian’s own use of language or to literature, philosophy, and the arts as important sociocultural practices supplemented but not altogether displaced in the recent past by media, film, and other forms of popular culture. Perhaps even less attention is devoted to the problem of how to read texts and signifying practices with an attentiveness to the way they involve complex uses of language, having variable relations to language use and associated signifying practices in different social groups and categories that are more familiar to historians. Yet at present the influential opposition between *langue* and *parole*, derived from Ferdinand de Saussure, as well as the postulates of difference and the arbitrariness of the signifier, may fruitfully be displaced in the direction of the complex relations

between (abstract) system (or certain forms of theory) and signifying practice (including but not restricted to language) in historical use. In historical processes (including literary practices) language is always caught up in a variable interplay between demotivation (or, at the limit, radical decontextualization, dissemination, and arbitrariness) and (re)motivation, notably through changing uses effected by various agencies with different degrees of power and authority, from the state through social groups to the individual writer engaging various traditions, genres, and other writers as well as the discourses of social and political life. This, in any case, was the valuable view of Mikhail Bakhtin and at times of Derrida—a view of greatest pertinence to those with a marked interest in the relation between history and critical theory.

The question of the history of language use indicates the importance of such issues as narrative structure, voice, perspective, and subject-position— issues that arise not only in the novel but also in the writing of history and that provide a basis for nonreductive comparisons and contrasts between literature—including fiction—and historiography. An important novel, such as *Madame Bovary* or any one of the other novels discussed in this book, should be seen as a significant event in history— an event whose significance to which the trial of Flaubert itself bore witness. This variant of the linguistic turn does not isolate or reify language. Nor does it give language a causal or formatively sovereign, radical constructivist power. On the contrary, how language is used and how that use varies over time and place—at times in the same text or discourse—is a problem bound up with many other crucial historical problems and processes, and for that very reason it deserves a prominent place in a critical and self-critical historiography.

The specific figures I discuss provide the occasion to inquire into more general issues in a manner that allows for comparative study and requires close reading sensitive to problems of language as well as translation. The groundbreaking work of Flaubert is a key reference point for other novelists I discuss. His relation to French was both intimate and alienated. At times it seemed to him to be a foreign language or at least a language on which he had to engage in now legendary labor in quest of a distinctive style, sometimes described in terms of a prose that would attain the rigor of poetry. The “*affres du style*” attested to an asceticism or *askesis* that brought both suffering and “joy”—a kind of sadomasochistic practice reminiscent of the self-flagellating spiritual exercises of saints and martyrs. This style was far from the fluency of ordinary language or the ease of a linguistic habitus that bespoke the immediacy of a second nature, even when the results of such a style in Flaubert seem to parallel or mimic the most everyday if not banal speech; and the radical transitions (for example, in the opening sections of *Madame Bovary* in which the narrative voice and perspective move from the first-person plural to a third-person form of narration) seem so smooth and seamlessly made as to screen the disruptive nature of the movement. This style is related to the “rigor” (or “exigency”) that later writers saw as a requirement of their craft. It is evoked in the self-commentaries of the Polish novelist (writing in English) Joseph Conrad, the ill-at-ease South African (who grew up speaking Afrikaans and late in life moved to Australia) J. M. Coetzee, and the German (living in East Angles and uncomfortably writing in German) W. G. Sebald, as well as the recent phenomenon Jonathan Littell (an American writing in French and a long-time resident of Paris) whose massive prize-winning novel, a first-person account by an SS officer of experiences and events during the Nazi genocide, I discuss together with Saul Friedländer’s two-volume prize-winning history, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, whose goal is to recapture—and punctuate his own narrative with—the unsettling “voices” of victims.

By the time one gets to Littell and Friedländer a belated recognition arises that may appear retrospectively to other writers, beginning at least with Flaubert: the very notion of a “mother” tongue may be illusory once one’s relation to language becomes problematic and is continually placed in question. This assertion could not apply to anyone more than Jacques Derrida, whose Algerian pa-

became an insistent concern and whose writing is markedly diasporic and orphaned. My epilogue addresses one crucial dimension of the thought of Slavoj Žižek, whose relation to language also warrants more attention than I give it in my focus on violence. Yet there is a sense in which Žižek (Slovenian) has a relation to language that is not simply problematic, most obviously in his heavily inflected, insistently dramatic use of English, but overpowering, as he forcefully translates popular culture into a Lacanian dialect and turns English itself into a recognizably “Žižekian” idiom that rivals the idiosyncratic, yet almost contagiously imitable, usage of other major figures, including the more gentle inflections, melodic sweeps, and chiasmic complexities of Derrida. I argue that Žižek’s provocative, indeed hyperbolic thinking contains certain questionable elements that at times echo uncannily, earlier reflections on, or apologies for, political and seemingly regenerative, even sacralized (or “divine”), violence. My discussion touches on the most disturbing and politically dubious dimension of a thinker who never fails to unsettle.

With respect to the intricate issue of the postsecular and its increasingly prevalent role in recent thought, I do not claim to occupy an uninvolved or detached position that puts me above the fray “*hors jeu*.”<sup>24</sup> I make no effort to rehabilitate either religion in general or any specific religious tradition, such as one or another form of Christianity or Judaism. Instead, my objective is to inquire critically into the role of sacred and sacralizing forces in history, including in philosophy and literature as well as critical theory. A goal of critique is to disentangle the sacred from sacrifice, indeed critically to construe sacrifice that requires victimization and violence (whether with respect to humans or to other animals) not as the epitome or even the origin of the sacred but rather as its distortion or disastrous abuse, often if not typically its anthropocentric appropriation oriented toward generating a sense of purification, regeneration, and redemption, at least for its human officiators or agents (should one say perpetrators?). In other words, I see the value of understanding religion (with Émile Durkheim) in terms of the sacred (rather than, say, with reference to a god or godlike analog) however hidden, radically transcendent, or “totally other”). I would, however, argue against construing sacrifice as the crux of the sacred (as did Georges Bataille),<sup>25</sup> or taking a given religion as exceptional in transcending sacrifice or at least providing the sacrifice that presumably ends (but has clearly failed to end) all sacrifice (as did René Girard with respect to Christianity).<sup>26</sup> The effort to disambiguate sacrifice and the sacred is an ongoing process, as is the attempt to delineate what in the sacred (or in certain construction of religion or the postsecular) may be worthy of affirmation, for example, the role of nondiscriminatory rituals in articulating transitional points in life—rituals that situate humans in a broadly relational network in which neither scapegoated humans nor other animals are victimized either quasi-sacrificial or seemingly secular, even antiseptic ways.<sup>27</sup> In any event, a recurrent motif of this book is the role of the sacred, its problematic status in sacrifice, its virulent manifestation in social and political violence (as in the Nazi genocide), and its multivalent expressions in postsecular hopes, anxieties, and quests.

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## CHAPTER 1

# The Mutual Interrogation of History and Literature

There has been a recent tendency in the historical profession that calls for a turn, perhaps a turn back, to a close relation with the social sciences and social history. This tendency is evident in William H. Sewell's widely acclaimed *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*,<sup>1</sup> as well as in the collection *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn*, edited by Gabrielle Spiegel.<sup>2</sup> Also evident in these books, notably Spiegel's introduction to the volume she edits, is a certain resistance to the so-called linguistic and cultural turns that stressed history's relation to the humanities, including literature and critical theory. In my judgment, it would be self-defeating to decide between the social sciences and the humanities on the definition of historiography. The historian's own version of a double consciousness is both valuable and in need of continual rethinking.

I would like to focus on one dimension of that process of rethinking with respect to the relation between history and literature. I think the most cogent and thought-provoking way to envision this relation, including what might be called the pressure exerted by the historical on the literary, is in terms of intricate and variable forms of interaction, especially modes of mutual interrogation. In other words, history and literature may be seen as posing questions to one another, the answers to which are not foregone conclusions. One crucial question is precisely how literary texts inscribe or process historical contexts, both in symptomatic, perhaps unconscious ways and through formal procedures that may be quite explicit and well crafted. A related question concerns the relation between historical and transhistorical forces that are intertwined and impinge on texts in different ways, with the epitome of the transhistorical perhaps exemplified at present by the Lacanian "real"—the traumatic void break that resists or even annihilates symbolization yet may provoke it as well. Another issue, which at least warrants mention, is the way texts are read differently over time in relation to changes both in the literary field and in the larger sociocultural and political context. (I note at the outset that, for the most part, I shall refer to literature, but the question I would leave open is the extent to which points touched on might apply to other forms of art as well.)

The two polar, more or less extreme and rather confining responses to the problem of relation between history and literature may well disavow or diminish mutual interrogation, but each has had noteworthy proponents. One might be seen as an "immanent" quest for thoroughly grounded knowledge in relation to which literature or "the literary" may be an object to be assimilated, perhaps even taken to be a

irritant. The other is at times a variant of the quest for transcendence, with the literary given ~~transcendental or quasi-transcendental status that may be construed in postsecular or displaced religious terms.~~

Perhaps the primary modality of the immanent quest is contextual reductionism in which a literary text is a mirror image or at least a symptom of some sociohistorical or perhaps transhistorical process or structure such as capitalism, colonialism, the rise of the individual, the emergence of a distinctive if not unique form of experience or subjectivity, even castration anxiety or the “real.” The text thus becomes a document of the times or perhaps of transhistorical forces. A distinctive variant of this approach, more sensitive to literary developments themselves, at least on a societal or general cultural level, traces the development of the so-called institution of literature, especially as a differentiated system or field of modern culture. The literary in this sense comes to form its own context, which is more or less open to other contextual pressures and similar in its dynamic to other differentiated systems or fields in modern society and culture (for example, science, business, or the professions).

The other response is a vision of the literary text as detached or disimplicated from, or in some basic sense transcending, historical contexts. The text may, however, be situated within the differentiated field or institution of literature in a more or less unself-questioning way or, on the contrary, in a radically contestatory, even self-deconstructing manner. Literature may be understood not only as engaging at times in modes of decontextualization but postulated as essentially in excess of or radically beyond its contexts, negating and/or transcending them, perhaps toward absence, impossibility, perplexity, ironic indirection (or “permanent parabasis”), and unreadability, if not “madness.”<sup>3</sup> Literature may appear to be a displacement of religion, and literary criticism may seem to be related to negative theology.<sup>4</sup> The object of study may be taken as tantamount to a sacred or perhaps a postsecular text whose exegesis suffices to reveal truth and whose close reading approximates pious practice or in itself embodies an ethic. In a more domesticated vein, the literary text, or the text read in its “literariness,” may be subject only to formal analysis in terms of its self-referential way of bending back on itself or being “about” the play of language. As Leo Bersani put it with reference to Flaubert, in terms which now seem more familiar than uncanny: “Flaubert’s novels are more interestingly about the arbitrary, insignificant, inexpressive nature of language.... Fundamentally language refers to nothing beyond its own impersonal (and discouraging) virtuosity.”<sup>5</sup> On this reading Flaubert marks the linguistic turn inward of literary language. And language itself is to be construed as a formal system similar to the manner in which music, mathematics, or abstract art is often seen.

By contrast, in contextual reductionism, literature becomes a document with referential function, perhaps a symptom of history’s hidden or secret dimensions. Historians, sociologists, Marxists, and in a somewhat different sense, Freudians and Lacanians have often taken this approach to literature and art in general.<sup>6</sup> For example, from a sociohistorical point of view, one reads Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* for what it discloses about the play of factions in early nineteenth-century France, perhaps about the suicidal fate of the alienated individual whose subjective values can find no home in the existing society. Or one reads Balzac for his insight into the development of capitalistic forces themselves the deregulated but systemic generators of excess and madness. And one reads Flaubert for his enactment of the autonomization of art as a differentiated sphere of activity that parallels the development of other autonomy-seeking professions. Two especially important theorists, separated by a generation, who propose variants of this approach are Georg Lukács and Pierre Bourdieu.

In his influential *Theory of the Novel* of 1920, the young Lukács elaborated a contrast between the epic, as a form in which there were answers without questions, and the novel, as a form in which there were questions without answers. Typical of the novel was the role of abstract idealism and romantic disillusionment in which the alienated hero could not realize values in the existing world and which generally had a tragic fate. In his own preface of 1962 Lukács situated *The Theory of the Novel* as a

overly abstract work whose interest was at best symptomatic of its context. The later Lukács turned from his early Hegelianism to a Hegelian Marxism in which the texts of so-called critical realists such as Balzac and Thomas Mann are valued, while the works of others, who are often seen as among the more experimental writers, esteemed by the young Lukács himself—for example, Flaubert—are understood as escapist or formalistic symptoms of bourgeois decadence.<sup>7</sup>

The later Lukács stresses the way critical realists provide perspective on social and historical developments—perspective that may even contradict their explicit ideology, for example, royalism in the case of Balzac. For Lukács, Balzac was more insightful about the forces of modern history than was the affirmed leftist Zola, who produced what Lukács presents as a merely photographic, uncritical realism close to positivism in the sciences. Hence, whatever their explicit ideologies, figures such as Balzac and Mann may be recuperated and used by Marxists in sociopolitically progressive, even revolutionary ways. One might say that the impossible quest of the early Lukács to find in art the presumably lost, integrated world of totality in which one could be at home was itself displaced on social and political action, and Marxism became the way to realize in historical reality the values that art could enact only in the mode of the impossible dream, the unattainable utopia, or the tragic quest. Still, even in the later Lukács, the critical dimension of art—often in ways unbeknownst to the writer or artist—was itself reflective of social forces, specifically the rise of the proletariat as the revolutionary subject of history.

In his 2005 impressive yet controversial analysis and critique of colonial violence, which he sees as the origin of later genocides including the Holocaust, Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison is on one level close to Lukács when he reads Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as an instance of critical realism in its analysis and indictment of colonial practices.<sup>8</sup> Unlike more simplistic advocates of contextual reading, Grandmaison does not present Conrad himself as an exponent of colonialism, racism, and imperialism.<sup>9</sup> Rather, following the lead of Sven Lindqvist in "*Exterminate All the Brutes*,"<sup>10</sup> he understands *Heart of Darkness* as drawing from documentary sources and Conrad's own experience to render a literary account of colonial activity typical not only of the Congo but of colonialism in Africa more generally, especially with respect to peoples, such as the "Arabs," who (at times analogized to American Indians) were seen as untamable, wild or savage beasts such as jackals—prey whose tracking was "certified" by taking a head as a trophy (157). More docile sub-Saharan blacks (at times analogized to American slaves) were perceived as *bêtes de somme* (beasts of burden), who could be a reliable labor force and even used for domestic service, although they too might go bad and become unmanageable like Arabs, as was the case with the Herero in 1904 (82). For Grandmaison, Conrad's novel is a more reliable history of these empirical processes than were actual histories of the time and even subsequently, histories that were misleading vehicles of ideologies of progress, imperial glory, and the "civilizing mission." He concludes that "the literature of Conrad, at least that which has held our attention, is a literature of radical and brutal disenchantment. That's why it was rebellious at its time; it remains so today, for it allows one to take the just measure of what was the conquest and colonization of Africa for the populations that were subjected to it" (167; my translation). Despite his trenchant formulations and incisive analyses, Grandmaison, while not reducing texts to symptoms of contexts and instead recognizing, perhaps even exaggerating, their critical power of provocation, does not inquire into their internal tensions or self-contestations, for example, that between Tocqueville's violent, at times exterminatory response to North African peoples (or to the working class in France after 1848) and his democratic liberalism, reserved for "civilized" peoples. He also does not look into the different if not divergent movements in *Heart of Darkness* itself. In Conrad's text (discussed in the following chapter) there is both a radical condemnation of, and a fascination with, the violent excess personified in Kurtz, a fascination that affects Marlow, the unnamed narrator, and arguably even the implied author and perhaps the reader as well, who is drawn in by the way a quest narrative almost

inevitably endows its object (be it the “heart of darkness”) with an ambivalent allure.

Pierre Bourdieu, in his *Rules of Art*, does not share Lukács’s Marxist assumptions and is situated in a different sociological tradition, stemming from Durkheim.<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu may, like Grandmaison, often subsume specific texts in a sweeping argument but at times without the sensitivity to the critical power of certain texts at their own time and over time. Bourdieu reads literature, specifically Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education*, rather one-dimensionally as symptomatic of social forces. The forces in question for Bourdieu are those bound up with the division of labor and more particularly with the functional differentiation and autonomization of spheres or fields in modern life. (His approach is a distinctive variant of a more widespread mode of analysis, probably most rigorously developed in systems theory, notably in the work of Niklas Luhmann.)

Bourdieu argues, plausibly enough, that one should not take art for art’s sake and formalist analysis at face value. One should situate them in the larger context of the division and autonomization of spheres as well as the spread of professionalization in modernity. However, for Bourdieu, art simply falls in line with the tendential regularities of modernity in general, and sociology is able to explain and provide the proper demystifying perspective on art for art’s sake, an ideology that artists or literary critics often inhabit from the inside. Aesthetes may believe art is an end in itself or a transcendent value, just as an academic may assert a fully disimplicated, objectifying “outsider” position on topics of inquiry or a CEO may believe that business is business or transfigure the market into a supernal blue flower or inviolable divinity.

Contextualizing theorists have the virtue of attempting to see and interpret literature and art in larger sociohistorical and cultural contexts, at times with an eye to political practice. It is, for example, informative to see Flaubert in the context of the emerging literary field of his time and to trace his relations, including his resistances, to figures and processes typifying that field, prominent including the commodification of literature. One of Flaubert’s motivations was to resist being like crowd-pleasing commercialized writers such as Paul de Kock or Alphonse Karr. (He was more inclined to identify with ascetic saints and monks, for example, Saint Anthony subject to maddening bewildering temptations.) But the difficulties with contextualism when it becomes reductive should be evident. A reductive contextualism does not sufficiently account for the work and play of the text or art in general, including its formal devices and the variably divided ways it may have a critical and possibly transformative relation to contexts and not simply be symptomatic of them. Thus Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education*, the very novel on which Bourdieu grounds his symptomatic sociological analysis, may be seen to a significant extent as questioning and destabilizing the autonomization of spheres in modernity and not straightforwardly illustrating or enacting it, for example, in the manner in which the novel itself may be construed as a historically and critically pointed reading of the time or the way in which, in the novel itself, religion, art, economics, and intimate relations, as well as private and public “spheres” in general, intersect or implode to the point of confusion.<sup>12</sup>

The view of literature and art as always in excess, negating and transcending sociohistorical contexts or forces, takes what contextualism underplays or denies and gives it an accentuated, at times an exorbitant, role. In its most challenging form, this approach stresses the role of the imagination, improvisation, and the nonrepresentational performative dimensions of literature and art, even the ways in which the latter place themselves—and oneself—in radical question. Literature may thus become the site of a sustained self-interrogation bearing on its conditions of possibility and impossibility. Literature in this sense may even be situated in the wake of religion, in the dual sense of being both in its turbulent passage and in a relation of impossible mourning with respect to it. Insofar as religion is unavailable but still beckons, literature explores the space religion has vacated yet made still haunt. It approaches what may be an absence, or at least a darkening, of the sacred and engages in an attentive waiting, at times with no expectation of salvation—what Derrida terms *une attente sans*



*attente* (translatable as a waiting without expectation, say, for a redeeming moment, total insight, or the recovery of a putatively lost totality). It may also raise the specter of utopian hope and longing but may leave it totally blank or at least not invest it with politically specific objectives or self-transformative rhetorical power. And literature may, like the funereal wake, merge mourning with gallows humor, at times exploring the often violent nature and effects of a deficit of effective ritual in modern society and the way even intended festivals or carnivalesque scenes may backfire and become undone. (Nothing may be more frequent in modern literature, especially literature involving gallows humor, than the spectacle of carnival gone awry.) Literature is of course also open to at times daring and risky experimentalism and improvisation, more or less constrained by deficits in cultural forms that might provide sustaining points of reference. Experimentation may include the writer's transference involvement (or self-implication) in the text and the issues it explores, an involvement mediated and at times dislocated by formal procedures that may, at the limit, attempt to "erase" the traces of the writer and his or her "experience."<sup>13</sup>

The literary "field," viewed from this perspective, makes Bourdieu's concept of field seem to much like a well-tended victory garden. Literature may even be construed as postsecular as well as postapocalyptic, oriented toward some form of transcendence or perhaps a disastrous yet sublimely vortex-like black hole—an all-consuming "heart of darkness" that threatens to turn us all into the living dead. Here literature moves vertiginously in an area in which religious concern and intensity occur in opaque, displaced, disguised, distorted, even disavowed ways that make the very distinctions between the secular and the religious seem to dissolve, perhaps giving rise to some emergent, ill-defined postsecularism—at times a kind of religious atheism, or what Derrida terms a messianicity without messianism.<sup>14</sup> And the postapocalyptic sense of surviving in the wake of a catastrophe or extreme event may either leave that event unnamed or name it in ways that are more or less explicitly seen as problematic. Such problematic namings include the "death of God," "Auschwitz," "Hiroshima," and the "postcolonial" as well as the "postmodern." (Uncertainty about conceptualization and naming, a "no longer not yet" sense of belatedness and a reaching for some indeterminate future or "beyond" are at play in the frequent appeal to the prefix "post.") At least until recently, the Holocaust or Auschwitz has been a privileged name for the unnamable, but one may also relate traumatizing events to, or even questionably subsume them under, a transhistorical source of disruption or disorientation, such as original sin, the passage from nature to culture, the separation from the mother, the entry into language or symbolism, the abject that precedes and unsettles subject and object, or the encounter with the traumatic "real."

This second mode of construing literature is more provocative, uncanny, and captivating than *terra à-terre* contextual reductionism. And in more or less distinctive ways it informs the work of some of the most important and demanding thinkers and writers of the last century, figures such as Mallarmé, Kierkegaard, Beckett, Heidegger, Blanchot, Kristeva, de Man, and Derrida. Stéphane Mallarmé's famous statement about poetry, "rien n'aura lieu que le lieu," epitomizes the challenge and the enigmatic uncanniness of this approach. "Nothing will take place but the place" places or displaces poetry, perhaps all that is literary (assuming one may approximate poetry and the literary), into a new place in which nothing and everything seem to happen. This place is not about other places but insistently carves out or performs its placements and displacements, at times seeming to be improvising (or skywriting) in the void. How it relates to other historical places, processes, and displacements becomes problematic and at times inscrutable. In one sense there seems to be an active decontextualization of the literary text that becomes intransitive and nonrepresentational. In another sense the literary text loses any putative autonomy and becomes radically open in unpredictable ways.<sup>15</sup> Somehow (as for Derrida) the text that has no outside gestures toward the totally other. In any case, history may be problematized and temporality reconfigured, often in varying modalities

repetition with change, at times traumatic change (for example, as in Virginia Woolf, William Gaddis, or Thomas Mann).<sup>16</sup> Especially in certain theorists, perhaps more so than in the literary texts they treat, history may also be transfigured into a literary trope or liberated signifier construed in purely literary or theoretical terms, for example, as excess, trauma, violence, or the sublime.<sup>17</sup> And disconcerting reversals or warps may arise in the relation of life and art. As Kierkegaard once put it, his texts might blush at certain aspects of his life. Or, as he wrote with respect to his use of pseudonyms (in a sense, a series of fictional doubles as narrators or commentators related to the role of indirect communication), pseudonymity “has not had an accidental basis in my *person* but an *essential* basis in the *production* itself, which, for the sake of the lines, of the psychologically varied differences of the individualities, poetically required a disregard for good and evil, contrition and exuberance, despair and arrogance, suffering and rhapsody, etc., which are limited only ideally by psychological consistency, which no actual or factual person dares allow himself or wishes to allow himself in the moral limitations of actuality.”<sup>18</sup> Here, experience with respect to literature seems to become literary experience or the writing and reading of the literary text itself.

Kierkegaard’s comment clearly contests certain kinds of realism, but it also indicates that a rather different relation to ordinary reality (or actuality) and its possibilities nonetheless informs apparently nonrealistic aesthetics and their import for various contexts. For Kierkegaard seems to be saying that what is possible or even demanded in literary production may not be desirable in life. Here two points made by Kierkegaard are pertinent to my analysis. The first applies to the role of a corrective that becomes misleading or confusing when it is simply taken as the norm or as a hegemonic form. Kierkegaard applied this to Lutheranism and, I think, to himself as polemicist and gadfly. One might perhaps apply it to recent theories when they are learned as a first language or an exclusive mode of analysis. Kierkegaard writes: “Lutheranism is a corrective—but a corrective made into the norm, the whole, is *eo ipso* confusing in the next generation (when that which it was meant to correct no longer exists).”<sup>19</sup> (As someone who once gave a course whose unofficial title was “Deconstruction as Second Language,” I take this injunction to heart.)

The second point bears on the relation between the indirect (or maieutic) and direct communication or style in an approach to problems, a point Kierkegaard makes with respect to religion but that might also be made *pari passu* with respect to the literary, especially when the latter seems to serve as a displacement of the religious in terms of radical alterity or (transgressive- transcendent) excess.

The communication of Christianity must ultimately end in “bearing witness,” the maieutic form can never be final.... In Christendom the maieutic form can certainly be used, simply because the majority in fact live under the impression that they are Christians. But since Christianity is Christianity the maieutic must become the witness. In the end the maieutic will not be able to bear the responsibility because the indirect method is ultimately rooted in human intelligence, however much it may be sanctified and consecrated by fear and trembling. God becomes too powerful for the maieutic and so he is the witness though different from the direct witness that he has been through the process of becoming one. (146; the quote dates from 1848)

Kierkegaard insisted on the differences between the religious and the aesthetic and saw allusion, indirection, irony, parody, parable, and so forth, as particularly suited to the aesthetic, prominent in including the literary. But “maieutic” indirection, related to midwifery rather than to more participatory involvement in gestation and birth, was not self-sufficient and had to be supplemented by directness, even though there was no simple transcendence of formal devices and no possibility of unmediated or transparent (immediate and nontransferential) directness. Moreover, the extreme of unrelieved indirection (perhaps including abyssal Romantic or post-Romantic irony, approximated but not epitomized in figures such as Friedrich Schlegel and Paul de Man), like the opposite extreme

direct witnessing as well as asymmetrical grace, creation ex nihilo, and full “presence” (or “absence and total otherness”), was a divine prerogative. In any event, a life of indirect communication (including parable and paradox) was available only to the God-man.

It is not true that direct communication is superior to indirect communication. No, no. But the fact is that no man has ever been born who could use the indirect method even fairly well, to say nothing of using it all his life. For we human beings need each other, and in that there is already directness.

Only the God-man is in every respect indirect communication from first to last. He did not need men, but they infinitely needed him; he loves men, but according to his conception of what love is; therefore he does not change in the slightest toward their conception, does not speak directly in such a way that he also surrenders the possibility of offense—which his existence (*Existents*) in the guise of servant is.<sup>20</sup>

A problem arises with respect to what is arguably the displaced religious or theological construction of literature itself as radical alterity, abyssal excess, endless negativity, asymmetrical nondialogism, or a quasi-transcendental “beyond,” when, unlike Kierkegaard, one absolutizes this view and makes it into an all-or-nothing consuming object of concern (perhaps a “postsecular” fixation). When the latter occurs, literature and history do not have a mutually interrogatory relation because one is either alienated from or consumed by the other, hence arriving at a situation not altogether unlike that reached by contextual reductionism. One obvious question is the extent to which one can recognize and even participate in the uncanny, at times compelling movements of a self-questioning notion of literature and still pose the problem of historical context, which requires a certain mediated directness in modes of address that are nonetheless nonreductive and thought provoking. Posing the problem of context in this sense would be neither a reductive “explanatory” move nor an inert, unreflective association, conjunction, or montage of formal experiment (if not phantasmatic projection) and documentary information. (One may take this as a key problem in the writing of literature and in both cultural studies, including postcolonial studies, and the historical approach to literature and art.)<sup>21</sup>

A further question is how a self-questioning, insistent, extremely discomfiting approach to literature may give rise to a formalistic methodology or to a more or less compulsive return to certain discursive strategies that resort exclusively to allusiveness, indirection, paradox, aporia, and the *mi en abyme*, with openings to history or to ethics and politics either being foreclosed or formulated in ways that remain enigmatic or circular (for example, with history construed as a trope or a literary fiction). When an approach becomes a methodology or the premise for a repetition compulsion, certain distinctions may be not only problematized (as well they should) but obliterated, including the distinction between literature and sociopolitical life or between everyday ethics and what sublime exceeds and questions it.<sup>22</sup> And, in a more technical vein, a formalistic methodology may take the place of an insistent mode of inquiry that cannot be codified or contained in a methodology. It would be misguided to conflate self-referential formalism with a defensible concern, in literature and other genres as well, for the significance of form (along with the attempt to explore the intractable). A crucial dimension of form is to resist immediate identification, say with characters or even with the narrator or a style, and to serve as the type of mediation that allows for some degree of critical distance and self-questioning. Such mediation need not be seen in stereotypical “dialectical” ways that are indentured to closure, totalization, or a progressive, all-encompassing movement of integration and *Aufhebung*.

*Aufhebung* is a key concept in Hegelian dialectics. It is generally understood as comprising three different and perhaps dissonant meanings: to negate, to affirm, and to lift to a higher level. It may be countered (as in Kierkegaard), deconstructed (as in Derrida), or even understood (as in Žižek) in terms

of displacement involving a repetition or variation that may possibly involve traumatic, disorienting, unpredictable, or aleatory change. The relation of theory to its object may be construed either as a “traditional” *Aufhebung* (as at times in Lukács or even Bourdieu) or as a mode of more or less radical displacement. Indeed, however much a theoretical construction or analysis tries to be “faithful” to its object, it arguably entails some mode of alteration and displacement, although the latter may be more or less cogent and convincing.

On the back cover of Paul Eisenstein’s *Traumatic Encounters: Holocaust Representation and the Hegelian Subject* Žižek hails the work in the following terms: “The book [is] a must: a forceful redemption of the power of theory.” Žižek sees the “traumatic encounter” of the book’s title not as “that of Holocaust, but the one between two seemingly incompatible events: the Holocaust and Hegelian dialectics. The result is simply shattering: both terms undergo a profound transformation. This transformation is for Žižek the basis of the book’s “redemption of the power of theory.” One may well think that the attempt to approach the Holocaust in terms of a revised understanding of Hegelian dialectics—in Eisenstein (as in Žižek) approximated to Lacanian psychoanalysis (an approximation that is itself a dazzling if not mind-boggling feat)—is a significant theoretical project, if not quite “simply shattering” or the “redemption of the power of theory.” Of principal significance would be not the “traumatic encounter” of a theory and a genocide but the extent to which a theory assists in it and is tested by, the analysis of a genocide and of texts or signifying practices that themselves address it.

One may recognize the value in the Žižekian approach validated by Eisenstein in its repeated encounter with the Lacanian real (or structural trauma) if one sees that approach as a kind of high-level transhistorical “fort-da” game that may serve to engage and perhaps mitigate existential anxiety while almost compulsively addressing it time and again. But its pertinence for an understanding of the actual and possible relations of history, theory, and literature may be restricted. Here a critical observation by Sebald is to the point, and his comment about the reading of *Doctor Faustus* may not be restricted to its “originally intended” readers, although the reasons for a certain reading may shift in valence from idealistic reaffirmation to a carte-blanche indictment of what exists combined with a seemingly “radical” desire for a thoroughgoing, even violent breakthrough to something completely different: “In *Doctor Faustus*, Thomas Mann wrote a comprehensive historical criticism of an art that was increasingly inclined to take an apocalyptic view of the world, at the same time confessing his own involvement. It is likely that few of the readers for whom this novel was originally intended understood him; the lava barely cold under their feet they were too preoccupied with the reaffirmation of their higher ideals, too anxious to free themselves of any taint. They did not go deeply into the complex question of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics that tormented Thomas Mann.”<sup>23</sup>

I think that what tormented Thomas Mann was not so much the transhistorical role of structural trauma or how it might explain Nazi behavior but what specifically the Third Reich did to Jews and other victims, what those actions meant for the understanding of Germany, its history, and its postwar possibilities, and how a literary work, while remaining literary, might address such momentous problems. In *Doctor Faustus*, the importance of the specifically historical is insistent, even if there may be problematic aspects of the novel in this respect (notably the invocation of the Devil, although one may take this reference as a metaphoric appeal to the traditional exemplar of radical evil, with the Devil being in one important sense a projective embodiment of Adrian Leverkühn’s own “internalized” self-questioning and self-doubts, notably in the central chapter treating the encounter between the musical genius and the shape-shifting wily one where the latter at times quotes Leverkühn himself).

Eisenstein does not account for the way the intricate formal relations in the novel (notably between implied author, interposed narrator [Zeitblom], “mad” musical genius [Leverkühn], various

characters, Germany, and the reader) function to resist any unmediated identification on the part of the reader and instead critically open various possibilities in reading. In *Traumatic Encounters*, Leverkühn's quest for the aesthetic breakthrough, enabled by a pact with the Devil, is itself an object of Eisenstein's own, and by implication the reader's, unmediated identification or at least uncritical affirmation, and it is linked to an interpretation of Leverkühn's varied and different compositions as "fundamentally a music of witnessing to that structural [that is, transhistorical or even universal] trauma for which [the Nazi] regime promised redress" (120–21). Eisenstein even presents *Doctor Faustus* as "provid[ing] us with a manifesto or blueprint for how to proceed" in and through the character and approach to music of Adrian Leverkühn. Not only is the Nazi regime construed abstractly as somehow responding immediately to structural trauma, but Leverkühn is seen as a Žižekian tragic or post-tragic hero who, in his musical "breakthrough" (associated in the novel with his mental breakdown), takes problems to an implosive limit and thereby does not give up on his desire, traversing the fantasy into a consuming suicidal abyss—a kind of existential *mise en abyme* "fort" or "away" movement that seems to obviate any resisting or impeding "da" or "there"). Indeed, the crux of the novel is taken to be Leverkühn's act of exemplary witnessing to the "holocaustal" process.

By contrast, one might argue that Leverkühn is not figured in the novel univocally as a model witness to a holocaustal process or as the ethical or political answer to Nazism, its rise, and the dangers arising in its aftermath. Instead, he has a complex relation to these forces, which has both its sublimely elevating and its extremely dubious sides. Except for the intricate central chapter, we see Leverkühn largely through an indirect lighting provided by his devoted, even adoring, yet disconcerted and increasingly agitated friend, Serenus Zeitblom, a Catholic and a humanistic child of the Enlightenment who does not fully understand Leverkühn and is presented as untimely and ineffective yet not simply to be dismissed. One thing that causes Zeitblom (and, in a different key, the implied author) such concern is the relation between Leverkühn, his music, and the preconditions for the Nazi regime. Indeed, there are many indications in the text that Leverkühn's desperate, ultimately apocalyptic music may be implicated in the currents leading up to Nazism that are explored in the novel. But it is significant that three years elapse between Leverkühn's Nietzsche-like subsidence into a coma, with an uncanny return to his mother's womb-like protection, and the Nazi accession to power in 1933, perhaps indicating not only the absence of a direct relation of Leverkühn to the Nazis but that even into the 1930s there were still other possibilities in German history. One might also suggest that Leverkühn in some sense fictively undertakes on the level of personal tragedy and self-sacrifice what the Nazi regime, by scapegoating others and construing them as causes of pollution and dislocation in the phantasmatic *Volksgemeinschaft*, came to enact historically through collective atrocity and murderous excess. Hence, one may agree with Eisenstein that Leverkühn is misread simply as an avatar of the Nazis. In an important sense he represents one alternative to them on a personal but not, I think, on a general or collective level. In any case, it is dubious in the extreme, on the basis of a reductive reading that is insufficiently alert to questions of both form and historical implication, to identify with and propose Leverkühn as a man for all seasons—the hero of his time and a model for ours.

In the novel, Leverkühn is figured as a highly equivocal being who embodies the best and the most questionable, if not the worst, in Germany, perhaps in modernity more generally. His transgression of limits is bound up with a self-destructive repetition compulsion and does not lend itself either to generalization (whereby Leverkühn becomes a potential everyman) or to a rather one-dimensional symptomatic reading.<sup>24</sup> Eisenstein argues for the acknowledgment of, or what he sees as the unmediated encounter with, structural trauma (the Lacanian real)—a notion reminiscent of an important Christian version of the authentic relation of the believer to the Hidden God. Eisenstein

even maintains (like Žižek at times) that this encounter with structural trauma (or the real) serves, and apparently suffices, ethically and politically as a counterforce to fascism and a holocaustal process. In this unqualified form, the idea may well be a theoretician's fantasy out of touch with historical and political problems. It not only skirts specific historical issues in the rise and functioning of Nazism, prominently including the nature and course of the Nazi genocide, but ignores the possibility that some fascists and Nazis may not have sought "redress" but, in their own way, were fascinated by what was played out, or demonstrated "fidelity" to the structural dimension of trauma related to excessive transgression, risk, and sublimity, which for Nazis were bound up with repeated scenes of victimization and violence. There are elements of the latter orientation in Himmler's Posen speech (which I discuss in chapters 4 and 5) as well as in the behavior of notorious Nazis such as Kurt Franz, Hans Kaltenbrunner, Christian Wirth, and others. (There are also indications of this orientation in Martin Aue, the SS protagonist and narrator in Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes*, which I also discuss in chapter 4.)

One may, however, possibly argue that one dimension of the Nazi phenomenon was a refusal to recognize sources of anxiety and vulnerability in oneself (which might conceivably be related to a disavowal of the "real" or of structural trauma in its bearing on oneself), along with a concomitant projection of all sources of anxiety onto a group of vulnerable scapegoated others. Here the results of such disavowal, eliminating the possibility of resistance to enacting excessive traumatizing violence that one acknowledges as a threat to one's vulnerable self, would be similar to the acting or playing out of what is, on the contrary, affirmed [as in Himmler's Posen speech]—the need to ruthlessly eliminate others perceived as contaminating presences, however difficult such action might be for those who perpetrate, witness, and bear up under it. But, to be pertinent to an analysis of the Nazis and their actions, any such appeal to structural trauma (or the real) would have to be qualified and articulated with a specific analysis of historical processes, including the construction of Jews in Nazi Germany, their ambiguous status as objects of both racial science and of quasi-ritual, phobic apprehension, their complicated, even contradictory positioning as pests (or "mere life"), as world-historical powerful forces allied to Bolshevism, and as contaminating or polluting threats to the *Volksgemeinschaft*. One would also have to address the attempt to "get rid" of them, first through expulsion or ghettoization, then through "extermination," as an intricate process that may well have been perceived by a significant group of Nazis as purifying, liberating, even elevating, and redemptive for the nation. How such an analysis itself would inform a reading of novels or other works of art, inquiring into whether and how their work and play, including their formal dimensions, come to terms with that genocidal process, would be the challenge of a historically and theoretically informed literary analysis. Eisenstein does not attempt such a reading. His argument appears to assume that there is only a choice between two options: a theoretical focus on structural trauma and a particularistic historicism isolating events or contexts and excluding theory, a choice that forecloses the difficult problem of articulating the relations between theory and historical inquiry other than in terms of mutual exclusion or derivation. Eisenstein's captivating and intellectually impressive reading furnishes, I think, a brilliant instance of the way a heady but reductionist and consumingly theoretic mode of discourse may induce the avoidance or subordination of both specific historical problems and the role of formal dimensions of art, taking one instead in the direction of a transhistorical ultraformalism or theoreticism.

Engaging the pressure exerted by the historical on the literary, along with the emotional power and the intellectual force of novels such as Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, in no sense excludes an appreciation of the intricate, at times experimental role of formal devices. I have insisted that my critique of "theoreticism," formalism, or a certain kind of transcendentalism in no sense implies a denigration of the importance of form, especially with respect to literature and art. Form

considerations help to prevent a simple reduction of the latter to symptomatic expressions of either transhistorical forces or historical contexts, while still raising the problem of the mediate problematic relation of novels or other works of art to both transhistorical and historical considerations. Moreover, in their most challenging modalities, formal analysis and quasi-transcendental conditions may be approximated both to each other and to questions of framing and implicit assumptions that may themselves be subject to historical variation. The danger in a certain application of one or another critical theory, including Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis, is the avoidance, subordination, or transcendental-theoreticist fixation of formal analysis along with disavowal of, or disinterest in, the way specific and historically variable formal devices are crucial to literature and its effects, both cognitive and affective. But a different deployment of critical theory may provide a mode of understanding that does not necessarily obviate or diminish the importance of formal analysis (and of framing) but, depending on the way critical-theoretical and formal analysis are articulated as well as the way they bear on historical issues with their relation to contextualization, may further complex self-questioning processes of understanding.<sup>25</sup>

One psychoanalytically inflected concept that has arisen with respect to extreme limit events is that of traumatic realism, and it presents a mode of realism that is not amenable to either conventional techniques of representation or to self-sufficient formalistic analysis.<sup>26</sup> More broadly, literature and art might be read in a nonreductive way as providing a relatively safe but at times risky haven for exploring problems such as the manifold modulations of acting out (or compulsively repeating) and to some extent working over and through trauma and its symptoms. The reader's relation to the text itself engages transference processes that also connect up with processes and problems in society and history. Moreover, from the perspective of a traumatic realism, ordinary reality is disrupted by disorienting, even shattering forces, notably including scenes of violence and abuse. As I intimate elsewhere, one might also see certain forms of experimentation as engaging and enacting simulated posttraumatic symptoms and trying to play them out or even work them through in a kind of intricate "fort-da" game. One way of reading Samuel Beckett from this perspective is as staging analogs of the disempowered victim and his or her persecutor, approaching at the limit the plight of the *Muselman*—the most abject and disconcerting inmate of the camps.

A thought-provoking suggestion, emerging, for example, from the work of Walter Benjamin, is that the discontinuities and paratactic devices of modernism resonated with the traumatic and posttraumatic shocks of modern life. These were touched on in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire but emerged most resoundingly with the major disruptions, deaths, mutilations, and "shell-shocked" survivors of the First World War, a catastrophic war whose effects were exacerbated in the atrocities to come. Responses to such developments and their aftermath played an evident role in the writings of key figures such as Sebald and Coetzee. But a particularly difficult "literary" case that may at least be mentioned is the famous use of ellipses by Louis-Ferdinand Céline that was bound up with an attempt to express the "immediacy" and the visceral unreflective quality of vernacular speech, especially in repeated moments of crisis. This attempt was a reaction to what Céline saw as the excessive cerebral, degenerate, effete nature of French society at the time, and in complicated ways it was related to his rabid anti-Semitism and advocacy of the Nazis. One may perhaps hazard the speculation that one thing that may have been happening in the gaps or silences of his gasping, at times elated ellipses, at least on a symbolic and "symptomatic" level, was the "unspeakable" yet, for some, exhilarating, breath-taking slaughter of Jews.

"As a Chinese proverb says, the stupid person, when a finger shows him something, looks at the finger."<sup>27</sup> The proverb could just as well have referred to an ultraformalistic approach. But, as I have insisted, the critique of a formalistic methodology does not negate the importance of form or the issue of how a text or artifact does what it does. Indeed, when it is not tantamount to a fixated gaze, being

attentive to the pointing finger is itself a critical procedure that raises questions to a “meta” level and may induce one to question the questions and their framework or set of assumptions rather than taking them for granted. The elusive quality of literariness is arguably linked to form even if one thinks that literariness cannot be identified in a purely formal manner or defined in a way that would no longer leave it in question. Here one has *inter alia* the problem of the tense, at times (as in Sebald) marked by a hybridized interaction between texts and genres such as the novel or historiography. It should be obvious that a significant text does not simply fall within or illustrate a genre but in part rewrites the genre by testing its limits and at times by transgressing them.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps in part because it has by and large not been housed in a professional discipline or subjected to highly structured codes, the novel is a genre that cannot be confined within restricted generic definitions and has throughout its history been actively engaged in interactions with other genres, both literary and nonliterary (not only historical research but journalism and the media). In the modern period the novel has been taken by a number of important theorists as especially important and even as having a distinctive relation to modernity. Lukács, for example, saw the novel as the form of the modern bourgeois period in terms of the individual hero at grips with larger social forces. Mikhail Bakhtin presented the novel as a dialogic and carnivalesque monster or grotesque being that legitimately transgressed its own borders and actively interacted with other genres. The novel has also been of special interest to some historians in terms of the problems of narrative structure, literary form, and the relation between fact and fiction in narration.<sup>29</sup>

Not only the novel but the literary in general has been seen as a special site for accessing experience, especially affect or feeling. Historians themselves will often be close to this view when they assign a literary work because it gives a “feel” for experience or life at a given time—what the French term *le vécu*. The interesting point or perhaps paradox is that literature or art in general conveys feeling in a fashion that does not detract from the role or importance of art’s formal properties. We are moved not through content alone, which without formal constraints might even appear sentimental or maudlin, but by the way content is articulated, formed, and deformed. Or rather even if we object to any opposition between form and content but see the two as inextricably intertwined, we may still find the capacity of literature or art to affect us emotionally as somehow requiring effective formal processes. The pathos of Conrad, Flaubert, Sebald, and Coetzee is bound up with the ways their texts do what they do, in other words, with dimensions of a text or artifact requiring formal analysis. And, especially in the aftermath of catastrophe or extreme disorientation, a style that itself attempts to address at times bewildering processes of repetition with at times traumatic change may both register the “voices” or echoes of the past and attempt stylistic variations that may be a more accurate rendering of certain complex processes, ranging from traumatizing experience to such possibly unsettling phenomena as secularization, the interplay of melancholia and mourning, the emergence of the postsecular (including the quasi-ritualistic and sacralizing), and the modalities of victimization, scapegoating, and prejudice.<sup>30</sup>

I have argued that a crucial problem for analysis at the intersection of history and literature is how a literary text comes to terms with the pressures of historical events and forces—an issue that cannot be treated in a one-size-fits-all manner. Certain texts as well as their readings may nonetheless signal the need for further inquiry into important contexts, for example, the context of losses or suffering undergone during the Second World War as well as both repetitions and variations in the way those losses have been articulated or represented (an issue active in the work of Sebald). One may also mention aspects of the colonial context, which, as Grandmaitron’s thought-provokingly controversial book indicates, have become an important concern for literary writing, critical reading, and historical research (notably with respect to such figures as Conrad, Coetzee, and to some extent Sebald). The lives and treatment of animals is another clear case in which literary, historical, and ethicopolitical



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