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The Problem of Holocaust Representation

In *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi doubts whether we can ever fully represent and understand the Holocaust. “Then for the first time we became aware,” he observes, “that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man.”[1] Since the late 1960s, attempts to understand, represent, and analyze the Holocaust—to give language to the Event—have proliferated immensely with seemingly little recognition of the dilemmas raised by Levi’s cautionary words. Can the extermination of some six million people possibly be represented and known? Is the Holocaust a uniquely catastrophic event that escapes all meaning? Are we able to remember and represent it?

These questions are profoundly important to the study of the Holocaust. Scholars such as Saul Friedländer and Dominick LaCapra have made pioneering contributions to our understanding of Holocaust representation and memory, but few others have tackled its multifaceted problems with the analytical boldness and force that Paul Eisenstein employs in his newly published monograph *Traumatic Encounters: Holocaust Representation and the Hegelian Subject.*[2] In this ambitious and intellectually rigorous study, Eisenstein attempts no less than to clarify the major epistemological and ethical problems that scholars, teachers, writers, and artists of the Holocaust face today.[3] Dissatisfied with what he identifies as the prevailing liberal and postmodern approaches to Holocaust memorialization, he discovers in Hegel’s phenomenological project a new way of thinking about the Shoah. At the outset, Eisenstein clearly recognizes that Hegel might seem like an unlikely choice. Critics have drawn connections between Hegel’s philosophy and totalitarianism, claiming that the Absolute Spirit leads to the exact same eradication of particularity carried out by the Nazis. Drawing from Slavoj Zizek’s reinterpretation of Hegel, Eisenstein counters this view forcefully. He argues that the Absolute Spirit hardly results in a stable, superior truth, but instead remains inherently incomplete. In the case of the Holocaust, Hegel’s totalizing gesture allows us to encounter the trauma of mass murder without being able to fully grasp, represent, or symbolize it. As Eisenstein puts it, “memory work in fact depends on our willingness to occupy a “totalizing position”—not as a means of replicating totalitarian violence against particularity, but rather as the point at which we, as human subjects, fully engage the unsymbolizable trauma of the Holocaust” (p. 12).

Eisenstein develops this argument further in a rich chapter on Hegel and his critics. He discusses first what he calls the false Hegelian positions of liberalism and postmodernism. Espoused by writers such as Harold Kaplan and John Rawls, the liberal approach attempts to draw from the Holocaust a stable, universal message about liberal-democratic values. The point is to reaffirm the principles of human rights, tolerance, and constitutional democracy in the face of the Nazi threat. In a post-Cold War world, Eisenstein suggests that this view has become especially attractive as liberal proponents seek
to find a new ideological enemy with the collapse of the Soviet system. The postmodern approach, in stark contrast, doubts the very notion that a universal truth can ever exist. As Dominick LaCapra has argued perhaps most forcefully, no single, stable narrative of the Holocaust can possibly emerge; representing the event must involve instead a perpetual working through the past that never reaches a final conclusion. A multitude of perspectives and approaches must exist in order to stave off any permanent meaning from developing. But while this approach serves as an important corrective to liberalism’s insistence on universal knowledge, it is not without its own problems. The inevitable proliferation of interpretations poses clear ethical challenges. As the Historikerstreit of the 1980s clearly showed, an emphasis on diverse approaches theoretically runs the risk of encouraging historicization and relativization.

Most importantly, both the postmodern and liberal approaches do not directly confront the horror of the Holocaust. Eisenstein argues that the postmodern insistence on multiple perspectives and the liberal obsession with universal knowledge defer encounters with the traumatic. One way out of the dilemma is to adopt Hegel’s totalizing position. Hegel’s phenomenology rests on the fundamental principle that every particular human utterance—how we talk or think about a given event for example—is always a manifestation of the universal. Adopting this totalizing position allows us to encounter the trauma of history, but in a way that cannot be fully comprehended or symbolized. From the position of the Absolute, we come to understand that the “stuff of history (testimonies, images, acts)? cannot be grasped or expressed or made sense of” (p. 74). Eisenstein proposes here overcoming the problem of Holocaust representation on an ontological level: a constituent element of human existence is that our way of ordering knowledge remains limited, contingent, and even chaotic. Hegel’s insistence, in short, that the particular is already universal opens up the way for us to confront the Holocaust, while not looking to gain a universal message from it (as liberalism would have it) or getting lost in the particular so that an encounter with the event is perpetually postponed (as postmodernism would contend).

Eisenstein fills out the rest of this argument in a probing set of chapters on four artistic attempts to represent the Holocaust. Moving in a dialectical progression toward the final, most authentic form, Eisenstein first discusses examples of the liberal and postmodern views before turning to two novels that he claims adopt a Hegelian position. Spielberg’s Schindler’s List forms the central focus of his analysis of the liberal approach. Since Spielberg’s film has already received a fair amount of scholarly attention, Eisenstein’s analysis of it is probably the least insightful chapter of the book. Nevertheless, he does a fine job at showing how Schindler’s List seeks to redeem liberal values: Schindler’s rescue of Jews uncovers how, even at the darkest moments in history, the notions of tolerance and human rights still prevail. A clearly triumphant narrative emerges by the end of the film. The example Eisenstein examines for the postmodern perspective—D. M. Thomas’s novel The White Hotel—avoids such an overtly political message. Constructed in a number of different forms from the verse epic to the private journal to a psychoanalytic case study, the novel presents multiple narratives in an attempt to avoid arriving at a single historical truth. Eisenstein suggests that this form brings the reader closer to the Holocaust through a kind of perpetual, unresolved meditation on the horror of the event, but in the end it is no more successful than Spielberg’s film in encountering the traumatic. The final section of the The White Hotel, in which Holocaust victims exist in an imaginary afterlife in the form of a camp located in Palestine, produces a triumphant ending that closes off any confrontation with the destruction of the Shoah.

In the final two chapters of the book, Eisenstein argues that the most genuine form of Holocaust remembrance simply bears witness to the event without creating redemptive narratives or delaying a confrontation with the traumatic. He contends that Thomas Mann’s Doctor Faustus and David Grossman’s See Under: Love represent examples of such an approach. In an imaginative reinterpretation of Doctor Faustus that is sure to spark debate, Eisenstein focuses on Mann’s central character Adrian Leverkühn. In recognizing the arbitrary and senseless nature of his world, Leverkühn provides an example of how one might witness the trauma of the Holocaust without attempting to impose a complete, fully meaningful order to it. David Grossman’s novel adopts a similar approach to memorializing the Holocaust, but in a more dramatic and explicit way. The novel’s last section narrates a Holocaust story in the form of an encyclopedia. For Eisenstein, this strategy represents the most genuine appropriation of Hegel’s phenomenology: the encyclopedia gives a universal view of the Holocaust that, by its very form as a collection of entries, narrates a story without any purpose. This totalizing perspective ultimately forces us to encounter an aspect of our own existence in this world. The Holocaust makes explicit the structural trauma of our own Being—the inexplicability,
chaos, and stupidity that defines our world.

In recovering the philosophical system of Hegel and applying it to the complex problem of Holocaust memory, Eisenstein has written an engaging and highly stimulating book. His trenchant analysis and provocative use of Hegel will surely spark debate among scholars interested in Holocaust memorialization. With the recent explosion of Holocaust memory over the past fifteen years, Traumatic Encounters is a timely and useful commentary indeed. But in light of this fact, it is perhaps too bad that Eisenstein did not write the book more lucidly. His dense prose might turn some readers away who are either less familiar with Hegel’s philosophy or less knowledgeable about contemporary discussions of Holocaust memory. Put simply, Traumatic Encounters requires patience and persistence.

More substantially, the book is less satisfying when it comes to discussing how certain Holocaust representations adopt a Hegelian position. Eisenstein provides an excellent theoretical discussion of how one might overcome the ethical and epistemological problems of representing the past, but this approach seems limited to only one artistic form, namely the novel. But fictional accounts are, of course, hardly the only ways in which the past is represented. Historical monographs, museums, monuments, documentaries, paintings, and poetry are all key vectors of memory as well. They would presumably be less suited for adopting the kind of totalizing position proposed by Eisenstein. In fairness, discussing these other forms of cultural media would have gone beyond the focus of Eisenstein’s book, but given the study’s theoretical ambition a brief discussion of this dilemma would have been useful. These general remarks should not, however, detract from the overall value of Eisenstein’s book. Traumatic Encounters is an engaging and erudite study that will be of much use for scholars from a variety of disciplines interested in ethics, epistemology, representation, and memory in the period after the Holocaust.

Notes


[3]. The book is based on the author’s dissertation completed at The Ohio State University and directed by Walter A. Davis.

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