Chapter 8: How to Write about the Holocaust

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As in many other things, not being an “authority” on the Holocaust makes it easier for me to formulate some basic ideas about it than for those whose lives and careers are directly dependent on it. I recently read Alvin Rosenfeld’s *The End of the Holocaust* (2011), which is mostly devoted to noting the failures of Western culture’s memory of the Holocaust. While I sympathize with most of the views the author expresses and certainly share his concluding apprehension concerning those in Iran and elsewhere who are happily dreaming of annihilating Israel in a “second Holocaust,” I would like to suggest a different, less polemical perspective on the subject.

The Holocaust provides an extreme version of the paradoxes that arise whenever we attempt to react as individuals to any real-world event. To simply take the event as a given is to abdicate our human responsibility to assign meaning, yet to insist on finding for it a “personal” meaning is to make our own judgment the measure of social value. The Holocaust poses this paradox in a maximally urgent manner, because, while it presents a spectacle so morally repugnant that we feel obliged to invent a personal way of “testifying” to it, it is a thing of the past that all our acts of repentance and charity cannot redeem. Hence it arouses reactions of denial, minimization, focusing on minor “positive” elements, de-Judaizing, attacks on the “Holocaust industry,” and so forth as ways of reducing it to more tolerable dimensions. At the other extreme, it inspires the suicide of survivors who cannot bear the guilt of having been “chosen” over so many others, coupled with the sense of irredeemable violation that suggests that one no longer deserves to live.

But the intensity and frequent moral inadequacy of these responses testifies to the fact that the Holocaust’s historical impact goes well beyond the realm of direct reactions and their exploitation in rhetoric and imagery. To take a contro-
versial example, when “happy” stories of the Holocaust such as Schindler’s List are accused of emphasizing cases that are in fact statistically trivial, I think a point missed is that the “happy ending” reflects not in fact the story of the Holocaust itself but what is hoped to be its place in history—as the source of a new sensitivity to oppression, including but not limited to the Jewish resolve that has sustained Israel. For the justification for Schindler’s List as “the story of the Holocaust” includes as well the postwar liberation of the European colonies and the Blacks in the American South. Here, and in general, I find it more useful to judge such works in their overall historical context rather than as attempted revisions, or re-visions, of the Holocaust. For the real story of the Holocaust cannot be made into a meaningful fiction, since the vast majority of its characters, those whom we desperately wish to memorialize, were not actors at all, only victims.

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My thesis has long been that reaction to the Holocaust lies at the origin of the whole victimary trend of modern thought, in both what I consider its praiseworthy accomplishments and those I admire less. However, like nearly all political actions (except those that can be defined in terms of the Nazi-Jew paradigm of the Holocaust, which is why this very designation is, unsurprisingly, paradoxical), these accomplishments are subject to the Hayekian principle that the “market” is smarter than its participants, so that a policy that may strike me as unjustified may in fact turn out to have a salutary effect on, say, the achievement of racial equality.

On the level at which this thesis is situated, specific reactions to the Holocaust as a historical event are no longer at issue; the question becomes how to understand the overall movement of thought that we claim this event brought about. To answer those who contest this claim, we must define victimary thinking and show how its categories can be conceived as reactions to the Holocaust. The point of such a discussion is not to prove that those who have made use of victimary categories in political and social thought “had the Holocaust in mind,” nor is it useful to argue with someone who denies either the Holocaust’s reality or its significance. The burden would rather be on such a person to provide an equally coherent alternative model, and only at this point would argument become productive.

But in fact the very notion of victimary thinking has no equivalent in everyday discourse, and not surprisingly there really are no other universal explanatory models. Most intellectuals reject the very idea of “victimary thought” and see themselves rather as defending the oppressed against their oppressors. In contrast, those who accept the idea of the victimary and are generally critical of the phenomenon it designates are not wont to seek justifications for it in history.