CHAPTER ONE

CATASTROPHE, MEMORY, AND NARRATIVE:
TEACHING JAPANESE AND JEWISH RESPONSES TO
TWENTIETH-CENTURY ATROCITY*

Alan Tansman

But it is the knowledge of how contingent my unease is, how dependent on a baby that wails beneath my window one day and does not wail the next, that brings the worst shame to me, the greatest indifference to annihilation (J. M. Coetzee).

Comparing Catastrophes

This essay explores my experience in the American university classroom teaching responses by twentieth-century Japanese and Jews to catastrophe. It raises concerns about the ethics of such a comparison even as it finally deems the comparison necessary for understanding the tangle of art, emotion, psychology, and history in which the response to catastrophe is enmeshed. The Nazi murder of the Jews and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima have occupied the modern historical and literary imaginations of these two peoples, molding their cultural and political identities and generating profuse expressions of their responses. To many, the experience of Hiroshima marks the beginning of an epoch in which world destruction has become more than a science-fiction fantasy. And to as many, the Holocaust signifies humanity’s greatest evil, functioning like a “ubiquitous cipher for our memories of the twentieth century” (Huyssen 2003: 18), a “moral and ideological Rorschach test” (Novick 2000: 12). The imprint of these events, after more than half a century, is deep and indelible.

Nevertheless, the comparison of the two events will strike some as distasteful. In teaching a course called “Jewish and Japanese Responses to Atrocity”, I have insisted that the students always keep in mind historical differences: the European Jews were the victims of a rationally planned and organized attempt to annihilate them, their deaths preceded by protracted torture of the mind and body; the Japanese citizens living in Hiroshima in the summer of 1945 were the victims of an instantaneous blast, victims whose emotional scars, like those of Holocaust survivors, took many years to begin to heal, but whose physical deformations were to scar future generations. This temporal difference in the experience of violence was one of many factors that went into shaping the experience and expression of these events. There were numerous others, not the least of which was historical: European Jews were not at war with their victimizers, and only the lunatic fringe would argue that they caused a threat or that their suffering was an unavoidable consequence of war. Japanese citizens, though individually innocent (in the language of human rights they were civilians but not responsible citizens) belonged to a nation at war with its attackers, and scholars continue to debate the necessity and the morality of the dropping of the atomic bomb.

Dare we ask whether the Japanese were victims the way the Jews were? The very question seems to suggest that degrees of suffering can be measured and that styles of mourning can be judged. It risks robbing victims of their claim that their suffering was uniquely their own and that the specific history that caused their pain was unprecedented and unparalleled. Comparing suffering leads us to the judging of suffering—a distasteful, even obscene, thing to do.

Who are we, we might well wonder, blessed by distance in time and place, to coolly and analytically interfere with the victims’ right (and need) to choose for themselves how to express their memories? Why should we point out suspected mistakes in a victim’s testimony or brazenly diagnose his claim to unique pain as merely symptomatic of the healing process? Everywhere we turn in the maze of suffering and memory we are discomfited by misgivings. Some of us feel we know that a victim’s silence is one symptom, or strategy, of mourning. We make the effort to empathize (though that seems impossible enough) and to analyze what is being remembered, however uneasy that task makes us feel. And when it seems right to respect the need for silence, we still fear one inevitable result of doing so: the silencing of history. For history does become obfuscated when, out of respect for