Lionel Trilling once suggested that a primary reason for the apparent decline of the novel as a form of art was the fact that ever since Hitler's destruction of European Jewry the task of revealing and articulating man's depravity, an activity that had been a chief occupation of the human mind for four hundred years, had been rendered unnecessary:

Society's resistance to the discovery of depravity has ceased; now everyone knows that Thackeray was wrong, Swift right. The world and the soul have split open of themselves and are all agape for our revolted inspection. The simple eye of the camera shows us, at Belsen and Buchenwald, horrors that quite surpass Swift's powers, a vision of life turned back to its corrupted elements more literal and fantastic than that which Montaigne ascribed to organized society. A characteristic activity of mind is therefore no longer needed. Indeed, before what we now know the mind stops; the great psychological fact of our time which we all observe with baffled wonder and shame is that there is no possible way of responding to Belsen and Buchenwald. The activity of mind fails before the incommunicability of man's suffering. ¹

Trilling was writing in 1948, shortly after the war; and however true his denial of the possibility of responding to the fact of genocide was at that time, it no longer seems an accurate description of our situation with respect to the Holocaust. After a lengthy silence on the subject, a substantial body of literature dealing with the Holocaust has come into being: novels, poems, memoirs, histories, diaries, biographies.

Not all of these responses, to be sure, are admirable or even worthy of the label "activity of mind." Many of them, including one or two used in this volume for purposes of
illustration and comparison, even make one wish that the famous doctrine of “silence” regarding the Holocaust had been observed rather than written about so abundantly. Some of our historians and biographers have so taken to heart Oscar Wilde’s doctrine that “the one duty we owe to history is to re-write it” that they have created what amounts to a Hitler hagiography. In fact, this enterprise has become a kind of right-wing equivalent to the left-wing historians’ “revisionist” view of Stalin as a gruff but kindly fellow driven to excesses by the intransigence of Harry Truman. At the present time, Europe is being swept by a “Hitler-welle,” a tidal wave of literature, subliterature, and films devoted not merely to de-demonizing Hitler but to making him into an object of hero worship. Indeed, to minimize or altogether to deny the Holocaust has now become, along with “anti-Zionism,” the main business of those who wallow in the filth of antisemitism.

But of course what Trilling really meant to say was not that there is no possible, but that there is no adequate, way of responding to the spectacle, enacted in full view of much of the world, of a genocidal campaign that had engaged the human and material resources of the German people for over six years, until its murderous work had been completed or else interrupted by invading armies. When Matthew Arnold, whose great modern disciple Trilling was, demanded “adequacy” of literature in his Oxford University lecture of 1857 “On the Modern Element in Literature” he wanted a literature that could give to his contemporaries an intellectual deliverance from their doubts and confusions by providing them with the complete intelligence of their historical situation. For Arnold modern experience seemed so disordered and intractable that he doubted the ability of the literary imagination to assimilate it and give it coherence.

But our experience and our historical situation are not Arnold’s; neither perhaps are our aspirations for literature. Even if one could have a literature that appeared adequately to represent and adequately to comprehend the spectacle of the concentration camps and death factories, would one
be satisfied with it? I doubt it. When you wrestle with an angel, it is probably better to lose than to win; and this is more especially the case when you wrestle with the angel of death who visited the Jews of Europe. We are, in other words, dealing here with one of those problematic human enterprises in which some degree of failure or inadequacy is almost a precondition of success, in which we can expect no more than a shattered majesty and a noble imperfection. To say this is not to make of the Holocaust a license for literary nuttiness and "absurdity" or a rare and splendid occasion for demonstrating the infinite elasticity of the literary image. Rather, it is to acknowledge that literary works (like many of those dealt with in this book) that are characterized by uncertainty, paralysis, and ambivalence may provide a more adequate response to the Holocaust than works controlled by a tangible voice committed to the traditional transmutation of suffering into beauty and chaos into tragic significance.

What Trilling called "the incommunicability of man's suffering" during the Holocaust seems at first but an extreme version of a problem that has always troubled writers: how authoritative can the imagined life of a fictional creation be about historical events? This problem was troubling Wordsworth when in Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1800) he said that the poet, in order to overcome the "slavish and mechanical" situation of those who only imitate what others act and suffer, was compelled "for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs. . . ." Dickens was addressing the same dilemma when he claimed, in his preface to A Tale of Two Cities (1859), a novel describing the butchers and the butchered of the Reign of Terror, that "I have so far verified what is done and suffered in these pages, as that I have certainly done and suffered it all myself."

Fewer than half of the writers dealt with in this book had actual experience of the ghettos, death camps, and outdoor killing centers of the Holocaust. If some readers are unwilling to grant to those writers who were neither victims
nor eyewitnesses of the great destruction the authority that they readily allow Dickens to derive from a suffering he did not himself experience, this is because they sense that what happened to the Jews of Europe is so different from anything else in human history that it cannot be merely imagined. Terrence Des Près, in his profoundly humane and intelligent work *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*, deliberately stays as close as he can to the testimony of survivors because “radical suffering transcends relativity.” 6 Nothing is more common in the accounts by survivors of their experiences than the remark that they had been not merely in a strange place but on another planet altogether. Generalizing from such accounts, Hannah Arendt remarked: “There are no parallels to life in the concentration camps. Its horror can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death.” 7 But many of the survivors have also admitted that they have very little confidence in the substantial relation between their own reports and the actuality of the camps, precisely because, once having returned to this planet and the world of the living, they can hardly believe in their own past experiences. Even Elie Wiesel, who is to the general public perhaps the best-known reporter of personal experience and loss in the Holocaust, has said, “The event seems unreal, as if it occurred on a different planet. . . . Did it really happen? I often wonder.” 8 We need not deny a certain advantage to the novelist or poet who works from experience and observation; but we must remember that the greatest imaginative writers have not been directed exclusively or even primarily by observation. No matter how much they were “protected” from experience, little of experience was protected from them.

With few exceptions, the writers discussed in this book were moved to composition by extraliterary motives. What the Yiddish critic S. Niger said of the postwar Yiddish poets is true also of many who have written of the Holocaust in other languages: “Insofar as [they] are conscientious—and they are—they no longer want to be reckoned with as artists
or 'mere' artists. It is as if they feel guilty that their people's and their own tragedy has become no more than a "theme" for their poems and stories." It should be readily apparent to all, and will be objectionable to some, readers of this book that I share the view of these writers that in the aftermath of the Holocaust the historical situation of the Jewish people is so desperate that an evaluation of Holocaust literature in merely literary terms is an unaffordable luxury. I have tried at all times to keep in mind T. S. Eliot's dictum that "the 'greatness' of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards; though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards."

Since the Holocaust, in which one-third of the world Jewish population and the spiritual center of Jewry were destroyed, it is the merest commonplace to say that the very fate of the Jewish people is in question. The oldest Jewish communities of forty years ago—in Germany, in Poland, in Yemen, in Iraq (where Jews had lived for 2,500 years)—today are no more. Unless there is an abrupt reversal both of the laws of probability and of the character of world politics, the last remaining coherent center of the historic Jewish civilization, the State of Israel, may not long survive. If, as Irving Howe has said, "the central premise of Jewish survival is a defiance of history," that spirit of defiance will have to overcome nearly insuperable difficulties if the miracle of Jewish survival is to be perpetuated.

From the time that Hitler launched his genocidal campaign against them up until the present moment, the Jews, a tiny and in most ways insignificant people, have been at the storm center of world history, apparently unable to extricate themselves from the front of the stage. This simple yet incredible fact has been uppermost in my mind as I considered the literature that came out of the Holocaust, which let loose against the Jews a primordial energy of destructiveness that has by no means spent itself. The more I read of the novels, poems, memoirs, and diaries discussed in the essays that comprise this book, the more I felt that I was reading not of a past finished and dead but of one
continuous (though not, of course, identical) with the total form of our present life. "There is," says the philosopher Joseph Dan, "no reason whatsoever to expect that the twentieth century will treat Jews any better in its concluding quarter than it did during its second and third quarters." 13

The "simple yet incredible" fact just referred to is but one of many that confront us when studying the Holocaust. If there is a recurrent theme of the essays in this volume, it is the danger to the Jewish people of incredulity, an incredulity that has been induced by that congeries of ideas we call by the names of liberalism or modernism or worldliness. "Worldliness," says Cynthia Ozick, is "the gullibility that disbelieves everything." 14 The Jews, once a holy people defined and disciplined by a belief that they had been chosen by God for a special destiny, have since the Enlightenment become by and large a worldly people, which is to say a people that denies its own transcendent reason for being, its own life-principle. The several critiques of the Enlightenment and its varied offspring that appear in this book contend that their historical situation now requires the Jews to choose between their attachment to liberalism, modernism, the seductions of commonsensical knowingness, and their survival as a people.

The fact that most of the writers dealt with in this book view the Holocaust from the point of view of Jewish religion or Jewish historical destiny may give to readers unfamiliar with the Holocaust as a historical phenomenon two misleading impressions. One is that the German criminals, who in many of the works here treated are disembodied and shadowy figures, were merely fulfilling a role previously assigned to them by Jewish history. The other is that the Jews brought their terrible fate upon themselves and even abetted the Germans in their murderous work.

To guard against the first misconception, one must remember the difference between the metaphysical and the historical realm. To view the German perpetrators of the Holocaust, as some Jewish writers do, as the modern
continuators of Pharaoh, Haman, and Titus is to view them under the aspect of sacred history, as an instrument of the divine will in His tragic struggle with the chosen but refractory people. It is not to exonerate them of full responsibility for the crimes they committed as active agents in secular history. The standards of literature, moreover, are not those of a court of justice. Even if they were, it is hard to see why the literary transformation of Hitler into Satan, of Mengele and Eichmann into devils, should exculpate them for their monstrous crimes. (They themselves, to be sure, anticipated that the unprecedented, the “inhuman,” scale of their crimes would itself render all existing forms of legal punishment absurd and therefore inapplicable.)

Strong as is the modern liberal instinct to exculpate the criminal, the modern liberal tendency to inculpate not only society but the victim himself is yet stronger. The poet Abba Kovner refers to this tendency when he writes acidly of those who betrayed Jews to their German executioners: “Perhaps they were not guilty—/ there is always someone more guilty:/ (the victim)/ (the victim).” It is for this reason that I offer my second caution in the form of a disclaimer. Especially in the first essay in this book, and to a lesser extent elsewhere, criticism of Jewish gullibility is leveled not only at “modern” Jews in general but at some of the victims of the Holocaust in particular. This criticism, which is usually made by the authors I have been trying to interpret, but sometimes also by the interpreter himself, is not intended to blame the victims for being victimized or to accuse them of significantly cooperating in their own destruction. Distinctions between those who believed in the stated intentions of the Germans and those who did not are important and must be made. The Jewish religious tradition that makes of all Hitler’s Jewish victims martyrs who died for Kiddush Hashem (sanctification of the [divine] name) cannot obliterate the knowledge that they were fallible human beings or remove the subject of their state of mind from critical discussion. But we must keep in mind always the distinction between the killers and their victims,
the fact that it was a central intention of the killers to turn their victims into helpless sheep before slaughtering them, and the fact that other groups and nations (all of whom had more arms and experience of armed conflict than the Jews) failed equally with the Jews to offer substantial physical resistance to the German death machine.

This book makes no claim to being a comprehensive and exhaustive treatment of the literature of the Holocaust. I have included for discussion mainly those writers who seemed to me primarily concerned with the relationship between the Holocaust and the course of Jewish history, the fate of the Jewish people. I have, for the most part, excluded those writers for whom the destruction of European Jewry affords primarily a stunning example and ultimate revelation of man's inhumanity to man, or the occasion for apocalyptic excursions in thought or in literary mode. I have also been forced to exclude writers—such as Uri Zvi Greenberg, Aharon Appelfeld, and Abraham Sutzkever—who, although immediate to my concerns in this book, are not readily available to English readers in translation. Even so, I have been obliged at times to be more expository and less allusive than criticism requires in presenting some relatively unknown writers who are included here.

In the first two chapters of the book, writers have been grouped according to theme. In chapters three and four, they have been grouped according to nationality, not merely for classificatory purposes, but in order to compare the rival claims of Israeli and American Jewry to the inheritance of the historical Jewish culture destroyed in Europe. The fifth and sixth chapters concentrate on two contemporary Jewish voices, I. B. Singer and Saul Bellow, whose power and distinctiveness cannot be subsumed under thematic or national categories, even though their work touches on much that is broached in the earlier essays. The two final chapters treat the theological dimensions of the Holocaust. The seventh chapter discusses the impact of the Holocaust upon the covenantal structure of Jewish religion. The eighth and concluding chapter analyzes a
little-known Yiddish novella by Chaim Grade that sums up and brings forth with startling lucidity and intellectual power most of the quandaries that the Holocaust has created in the imagination of the Jewish writer and for the future of the Jewish people.

4. For a description and analysis of this "new" antisemitism, see Yehuda Bauer, The Holocaust in Historical Perspective (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978), especially the chapter "Against Mystification: The Holocaust as a Historical Phenomenon."
10. The best-known example of a relentlessly literary critical study of Holocaust literature is Lawrence L. Langer's The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975). In this ambitious survey of the European literature of the Holocaust, the fate of the Jews is most often discussed as an aesthetic instrument that "catalyzes the imagination as it expands to symbolic dimensions" (p. 61). Langer deals with the poems and novels of his authors (none of whom, it should be noted, wrote in Yiddish or Hebrew) in the phenomenological manner, "enlarging" on what the literary works say about the Holocaust in order to add to their ultimate significance. His own touchstone of value in judging Holocaust literature is "its ability to evoke the atmosphere of monstrous fantasy that strikes any student of the Holocaust, and simultaneously to suggest the exact details of the experience in a way that forces the reader to fuse and reassess the importance of both" (p. 30).
The Resonance of Dust
That they could all be murdered, the Jews of Vilna, Kovno, Bialystok, Warsaw, the millions with their wives and children—hardly a single one wanted to believe that. What was the meaning of this? Was it just blindness?—Abba Kovner

There is a great temptation to explain away the intrinsically incredible by means of liberal rationalizations. In each one of us, there lurks such a liberal, wheedling us with the voice of common sense.—Hannah Arendt