During World War II, American policy toward rescuing Jews from Europe could have been the occasion of a tragic conflict of loyalties for the American Jewish community. Yehuda Bauer has succinctly described that policy as follows: "Every humanitarian consideration was dropped, and the slogan 'rescue through victory' became the statement of official policy. This policy did not take into account that few Jews would remain to be rescued after victory." The conflict never occurred: the Jews of Europe were left to be murdered, and their brethren in the United States, who barely thought of allowing their Jewish loyalties to "interfere" with the war effort, remained largely undisturbed by tragedy or divided loyalties.

If one large segment of American Jews, descended either actually or spiritually from the German Reform movement, had always believed that they were Americans of the Jewish persuasion rather than members of the Jewish people, another large and vocal group, those descended from Eastern Europe and imbued with the ethos of Jewish radicalism and socialism, believed themselves to be, not Americans of course, but internationalists first, and Jews second (if Jews at all). Irving Howe has pointed out the way in which Eastern European Jewish socialists, from the beginning of their life in America, "yearned to bleach away their past and become men without, or above, a country." They stubbornly denied that there could be any problems peculiar to Jews as a people and worth addressing as such. To admit this possibility was for them particularism, provincialism, nationalism. "Rebelling against the parochialism of traditional Jewish life," says Howe, "the Jewish radicals improvised a parochialism of their own—but with this difference: they called it 'universalism.'"
the time of the Holocaust, socialism no longer held so compelling a sway over American Jews as it once did. Yet their loyalty to, and enthusiasm for, President Roosevelt derived largely from a belief that, even though he retained the capitalist structure of American society, he had done much to realize their old socialist program through piecemeal reform. At the very time, therefore, that Franklin Roosevelt was, by doing nothing to admit Jewish refugees to the United States, sending hundreds of thousands of Jews to their death, American Jews were his most fervent, uncritical, and reliable bloc of supporters. Even when the war was over and the full extent of Roosevelt’s shameful guilt became known, the long-standing conviction of the American Jewish community that the best way to ameliorate the condition of Jews was to ameliorate American society at large was unshaken.

Not long after the war, a generation of American Jewish writers* arose who purported to satirize every aspect of American Jewish life. Every American Jewish malady, still more any American malady that could with any plausibility be labeled Jewish—suffocating maternal affection, suburban vulgarity, materialism, kitchen religion—was mercilessly pilloried. But the fact that the most powerful, or at any rate, least powerless, Jewish community in the world had abnegated responsibility for its helpless brethren during their hour of utmost need did not, apart from a few isolated instances, provoke moral satire. Another malady from which the Jewish satirists studiously withheld their irony was the Jewish infatuation with leftist political movements, a delusion that gives every indication of being the most damaging to Jewish existence, the most permanent in its destructiveness, since the seventeenth-century delusion with Sabbatai Zevi.

These two great avoidances were connected with each

*I include in this group not only American Jewish writers who accept the label calmly but also those, like Philip Roth, who protest that “I am not a Jewish writer; I am a writer who is a Jew.” I do not include American Yiddish writers or someone like Wiesel, who writes in French. American Jewish poets who have dealt seriously with the Holocaust include Irving Feldman, Anthony Hecht, Charles Reznikoff, and Shirley Kaufman.
other in more than an accidental way. It is not the fashion of any satirist to select as his primary subject precisely those moral evasions of which he has himself been guilty or those false idols after which he has himself been lusting. It is a hero and not a clod who declares for himself and his author Norman Mailer that “‘the massacres and pogroms, the gas chambers, the lime kilns—all of it touched no one, all of it was lost.’” The imagination of American Jewish writers was not effectively touched by the Holocaust either during its occurrence or for two decades afterward (this despite the fact that detailed information about the massacres was available to those who could read newspapers from December 1942). One of Saul Bellow’s characters in his 1944 novel *Dangling Man* provides the exception that tests the rule. Awaiting induction into the army, the hero Joseph dreams that he is in a low chamber surrounded by rows of murdered people, one of whom he has been charged with identifying and reclaiming. His charnel-house guide reads from an identity tag a place name which reminds Joseph that “in Bucharest . . . those slain by the Iron Guard were slung from hooks in a slaughterhouse. I have seen the pictures.” In horror, he jumps back “in the clear,” and claims that “I was not personally acquainted with the deceased. I had merely been asked, as an outsider.” He wonders why he and his friends have so easily accustomed themselves to the slaughter in Europe and why they have so little pity for the victims. But his answer does not venture beyond the most charitable of explanations: “I do not like to think what we are governed by. I do not like to think about it. It is not easy work, and it is not safe. Its *kindest* revelation is that our senses and our imaginations are somehow incompetent.”

The causative link that, in my view, exists between the absence of the Holocaust and the absence of satire of the American Jew’s love of leftist humanitarianism from American Jewish fiction is also hinted at in this literally exceptional novel. The eventual induction of Bellow’s hero into the army not only takes him away from the dreamworld of American freedom back to the European
world of limited choice and unlimited bloodshed; it also forces him to give up his scholarly work on the Enlightenment. In fact, however, his fascination with this subject had already begun to wane, for reasons that are evident in his explanation of why he quit the Communist party: "'You see, I thought those people were different. I haven’t forgotten that I believed they were devoted to the service of some grand flapdoodle, the Race, le genre humain. Oh, yes, they were! By the time I got out, I realized that any hospital nurse did more with one bedpan for le genre humain than they did with their entire organization. It’s odd to think that there was a time when to hear that would have filled me with horror.'"

The Enlightenment and the French Revolution granted Jews equal rights simply because they belonged to le genre humain. Despite the Enlightenment’s unconcealed hatred of Judaism (and often of Jews), no group believed more fervently than the Jews that the Christian Trinity had been supplanted as a motive force in the European mind by the new Trinity of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. The revolutionists would grant everything to the Jews as individuals, but nothing to them as a people or a distinct group. Jews impressed by the new dispensation came to believe that they must relinquish their national character in order to assimilate with "humanity." They were not noticeably disturbed by the fact that in practice their assimilation was not with all humanity but with the particular people among whom they lived. Thus, while the People Israel was rapidly improving itself out of existence, the other peoples—the French, the Poles, the Germans—were asserting their national rights more boldly than ever.

But no conviction has ever been more resistant to negative evidence than the belief of the Jewish leftist in the promises held out to him by declarations of human rights. The leftist-supported pogroms in Russia in the 1880s; the espousal by every left-wing party in nineteenth-century France of antisemitism; the Dreyfus Affair; the refusal of the German Socialists to condemn antisemitism during the 1930s; the destruction of European Jewry amidst worldwide
indifference: such an accumulation of horrors might have been thought finally destructive of the delusory belief in emancipation, equality, assimilation, and enlightenment. A non-Jewish observer like Francois Mauriac, when he witnessed trainloads of Jewish children standing at Austerlitz station in Paris awaiting deportation to the death camps, knew that “the dream which Western man conceived in the eighteenth century, whose dawn he thought he saw in 1789, and which . . . had grown stronger with the progress of enlightenment and the discoveries of science—this dream vanished finally . . . before those trainloads of little children.” But the faith of the Jewish universalist has proved more immune to the evidence of mere experience than that of the French Catholic; and everything we know of Jewish life in the United States shows that this faith has survived the Holocaust itself. Here a majority of Jews do not merely look upon the varied offspring of Enlightenment universalism as conducive to Jewish existence but actually believe Judaism itself to be coextensive with them.

The persistence of the universalist-humanist delusion among American Jews even in the wake of the Holocaust is nowhere represented with more symbolic force than in Bernard Malamud’s story “The Lady of the Lake” (1958), one of but two stories in his work dealing directly with the Holocaust. The protagonist comes into a small inheritance and decides to go abroad “seeking romance.” In the States, where “a man’s past was . . . expendable,” he was Henry Levin, but once in Europe Levin takes to calling himself Henry Freeman, thus symbolically severing his Jewish ties. When he meets an attractive Italian girl named Isabella he identifies himself as an American but denies his Jewish identity. He wonders, since “he absolutely did not look Jewish,” why she should ask the question of him, but quickly dismisses it as a quirk. “With ancient history why bother?” One of her attractions, to be sure, is precisely a face that carries “the mark of history,” that is, of “civilized” Italian history. But at the crucial moment, when he comes to propose marriage to Isabella, she reveals her breasts, on
whose "softened tender flesh" he recognizes the tattooed blue numbers of the concentration-camp inmate that show her Jewish identity. "'I can't marry you. We are Jews. My past is meaningful to me. I treasure what I suffered for.'" Levin-Freeman suddenly discovers the emptiness of his freedom and, having deprived himself by his deception of what he most desired, can only stammer, "'Listen, I-I am—.'" But before he can supply the missing label, Isabella disappears into the night. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, it is not enough for the American Jew simply to be an American, or even simply "to be." To embrace the fullness of life that Isabella here represents, he must embrace the particularity of his Jewish identity, an identity that is forevermore inseparable from the experience of the Holocaust.

Levin-Freeman is symbolic not only of the American Jew who has evaded his moral responsibility and impoverished his life by cutting himself off from the Jewish past. He may also be taken as a symbol of the American Jewish writer who, in embracing what Cynthia Ozick has called the "Diaspora of freedom," has doomed himself to the obscurity of a perpetual involvement "with shadow, with futility, with vanity, frivolity, and waste." He has denied the novelist's responsibility to engage and extend his readers' imaginative sympathy, and he has impoverished his own art by separating his Jewish characters from their history, which could have provided him with that norm of behavior without which satire becomes sterile.

Thus the "silence" of most American Jewish writers on the Holocaust was not (as has sometimes been urged in their defence) an awed acknowledgement of the unspeakable and unimaginable character of the evil that occurred, or the implicit admission that what is absolutely unprecedented in human affairs cannot be imitated in a literary action. American Jewish writers have hardly been struck dumb in the face of various evils that (however mistakenly) they consider on a par with Auschwitz and Treblinka. Carlyle once spoke of the unique eloquence of "the SILENCE of deep Eternities, of Worlds from beyond the morning-stars."
But the long silence of American Jewish literature on the Holocaust was eloquent only of its own failure to shake off the incubus-like ideological superstitions of modern Jewry and grasp its proper subject—even though to do so would have been to admit that Jewish suffering had been not merely an indiscriminate part of man's inhumanity to man but unique, and that the human rights granted to Jews as "freemen" and individuals had been an invitation to self-destruction. As Norma Rosen recently wrote, "The Holocaust is the central occurrence of the Twentieth century. It is the central human occurrence. It cannot therefore be more so for Jews and Jewish writers. But it ought, at least, to be that."6

Among the best-known American Jewish writers, with the exception (again) of Saul Bellow, this silence even today has not been broken. But if we now turn from speculation about why we have not had, in America, a substantial literature of the Holocaust to evaluation of what we do have, we will notice a gradual awakening in our literary culture that seems to have been spurred by the Eichmann trial and the Six-Day War. Since the sixties, a number of American Jewish writers, including some of the most gifted, have sought to rediscover for us in the Holocaust our own buried life.

We still frequently notice, in this literature, the deep-seated reluctance to conceive of specifically Jewish suffering, as well as a compulsive desire for discovering analogies between Jewish suffering and that of whatever oppressed and allegedly oppressed group (not excluding the Arabs) is at the time of writing the special beneficiary of liberal-left benevolence. The most hideous example of this tendency is probably Richard Elman's pseudo-documentary novel The 28th Day of Elul (1967). The novel's hero is a survivor who writes from Israel to the lawyer of a deceased American uncle to prove that he is truly a Jew and therefore deserving of his uncle's legacy. By way of explaining to the lawyer what Hitler's victims endured, the best he can do is say "they were treated like niggers." The worst he can think to say of the German murderers themselves is that they are
like Americans, who are "just as guilty" because they dropped bombs on Hamburg and Dresden—or like (to this point does egalitarian nihilism invariably lead us) Israeli army officers. The German organizers of mass killing were, according to the moral and historical perspective of this writer who is all knowingness and no knowledge, just like bourgeois functionaries everywhere. " 'We even have them in Israel . . . with patches over their eyes.' " This book, whose narrator-hero says he is no more a conscious member of the Jewish religion than of the "human race," bears out in a truly remarkable way Cynthia Ozick's further observation that "whoever thinks it necessary to declare the Jews members of 'mankind' is not quite sure of the very proposition he finds it necessary to declare; and, like Shakespeare, he can end by confusing the victim with the victimizer."

Even in works infinitely superior to Elman's in literary tact and moral imagination, we often encounter the desire to make the Jew into "an archetype of the eternal oppressed." This may begin with the understandable intention to relate the Holocaust to what is readily available in the experience of the author and his imagined audience. But it can end by transfusing the blood of Jewish culture and Jewish experience into the caput mortuum of universalist ethical demonstrations.

In Edward Wallant's *The Pawnbroker* (1962), the hero is Sol Nazerman, who lost his wife and children during the Holocaust and himself suffered mutilation through medical experimentation. Formerly a professor in Poland, in his American incarnation he is a pawnbroker whose shop exists to subserve the interests of a Mafia gangster. He believes that all life has been gassed and burned in those crematoriums where he had himself been forced to work. His hopes amputated long ago, his greatest wish now is to be free of human relationships beyond the formal ones required by his home life with the shallow, assimilated "American" family of his sister, and by his business transactions with the derelicts who frequent his shop. To satisfy his biological needs, he occasionally sleeps with a
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survivor named Tessie Rubin. The act is a form of necrophilia, a consummation not of tenderness or love but of the desperation and anguish of people who have lost the will to live. He resents the attempted intrusion upon his privacy and unfeelingness by a well-intentioned social worker, Miss Birchfield. His true life is among the dead, and comes to him in dreams of his murdered family and people. Wallant conveys very powerfully the spiritual distance that separates Nazerman from his mindless relatives, his hostile black and Puerto Rican customers, and the woman who loves him yet wishes the blue numbers on his arm and the memories they represent would disappear altogether.

"There is," he tells Miss Birchfield, "a world so different in scale that its emotions bear no resemblance to yours; it has emotions so different in degree that they have become a different species!"

Finally, however, Wallant proves as unwilling to accept this wall of separation and distinction as the naïvely well-intentioned social worker, who hopes to "cure" Sol of his "bitterness" and make him a "human being" again. Sol has refused emotional relationship not only with her but also with his black Puerto Rican assistant, Jesus Ortiz, who emulates Sol in what he takes to be the peculiarly Jewish magical power of pawnbrokerism. When Jesus asks about those same blue numbers, "Hey, what kind of tattoo you call that?" Sol replies, "It's a secret society I belong to. . . . You could never belong. You have to be able to walk on the water.' " Jesus has some vague sense of, and curiosity about, the suffering that is evident in Sol's face and manner: "Niggers,' " he complains, "suffer like animals. They ain't caught on. Oh, yeah, Jews suffer. But they do it big, they shake up the worl' with their sufferin'." But Jesus is entirely ignorant of the specific sources of that suffering, the Holocaust not being one of those irritants to the feelings of minorities for the alleviation of which the American educational system offers its famed "sensitivity" training. Sol has no desire to enlighten Jesus, and neither does Wallant himself. Indeed, it is characteristic of American Jewish writing, drawn compulsively to the
relationship between blacks and Jews, invariably to assume that although Jews are under the most compelling of obligations to fathom black suffering, blacks are under no obligation whatever to fathom Jewish suffering, much less to have heard about it. (It is truly a wonderful example of liberal condescension which assumes that blacks may be complete human beings without achieving imaginative sympathy with their neighbors, whereas their neighbors are absolutely required to identify with the plight of blacks if they are to live lives that are both moral and fully integrated.)

It is only when Sol can be made to suffer for Jesus that Sol’s icy encasement will melt away, that his rehabilitation will be possible, and that his own suffering will be subsumed within the general suffering of humanity. The curative process begins when he discovers that his Mafia employer also runs the house of prostitution where one of his black customers works. He remembers the sexual enslavement of his wife by the Gestapo, and, even though he has always taught Jesus that belief in money is the only absolute in this world, he now refuses to be paid with money from the whorehouse and is brutally beaten for his new finickiness. The barriers to memory are now down, and Sol’s nightmare visions begin to penetrate his waking life and crack his unfeeling armor.

Heavy symbolic operations now come into play, all of them intended to validate Jewish suffering by linking it, through Christian Symbolism, with the plight of dark-skinned Americans. Jesus, who has been conspiring with a gang of black hoodlums to rob the shop of his employer, goes into a church before joining his comrades. Looking at a statue of Jesus Christ, he is struck by the vague recognition that this savior of his was not only a white man and therefore incapable of knowing what blacks must endure, but also a Jew and therefore linked with the pawnbroker. “And He was a Jew, too, like the Pawnbroker; there’s a laugh for you. He tried to imagine the Pawnbroker in a position like that, nailed up on a cross. . . . He began to chuckle, harshly. Wouldn’t everybody be shocked to see Sol
Nazerman up there, his arm with the blue numbers stretched out to the transfixed hand?” At last illumination has come to Jesus Ortiz on this little matter of the blue numbers; it is in truth a property of crucified humanity. Sol Nazerman, whom Ortiz knows to be a possible, albeit not intended, casualty of the armed robbery, becomes fixed in his mind’s eye as Jesus Christ crucified. The old literary-psychological device of the “double” asserts the interdependent existence of the Puerto Rican and the Jewish Jesus, whose surname, it now dawns on us, bears a strong resemblance to “Nazarene.” In the robbery, it is Jesus Ortiz who literally “dies for” Sol Nazerman by stepping in the line of a bullet. With his death, Sol’s long-dead emotions burst into life.

The symbolism may at first seem imprecise, working to conceal rather than reveal meaning. But in truth the symbolism of the doubling has its own logic, however unappealing. Jesus Ortiz has been sacrificed on behalf of Sol Nazerman, in that his death serves to bring Sol back to life. But Sol too has been sacrificed, not so much for Ortiz as for the suffering humanity he represents, not so much in his body as in the uniqueness of his memories and of the Jewish people’s suffering. In his final dream, Sol walks over the desolate grounds of the death camp, “monument to a forgotten race.” He meets an S.S. officer who turns out to be the Mafia gangster, and informs Sol, “‘Your dead are not buried here.’” The tears that signify Sol’s return to life are at first mysterious to him, “until he realized he was crying for loss of one irreplaceable Negro who had been his assistant and who had tried to kill him but who had ended by saving him.” The dilution of the Jewish literary imagination brings even a fine writer like Wallant to the point where the Jews are asked not merely to give up their lives for the benefit of downtrodden minorities but their deaths as well.

*Touching Evil* (1969), by Norma Rosen, is a novel whose reach far exceeds its grasp. It tries to imagine how Americans, specifically non-Jewish American women, who have been touched by the evil of the Holocaust might try to
think and feel and imagine their way into the lives of those who had been tortured and killed. The two crucial dates of the story are 1944, when the older of the two women central to the story, having been shown photographs of the death camps at the very moment when she is being seduced, vows she ‘‘will never marry or have children,’’ and 1961, when the younger woman, Hattie, dutifully follows the Eichmann trial on television during her pregnancy. She too has misgivings about propagating the species because, in her view, the Germans have poisoned the very process of generation. But her burgeoning into motherhood is vital to her spiritual existence because it is the path by which she enters into the lives of those whose blood will otherwise be covered by the earth. She suspends her personal rhythms of existence and identifies herself with those “far-gone pregnant women in their forced march; the woman giving birth in the typhus-lice-infested straw; the woman who was shot but did not die, and who dug her way from under a mountain of corpses that spouted blood. . . . ”

Unfortunately, Norma Rosen has not pursued this striking central idea with sufficient concentration. She too allows herself to be diverted by the temptations of analogy, of heavy symbolism, and feminist topicality. In fact, the book concludes with the older woman “looking for Jesus,” who, precisely like Wallant’s character of the same name, is a Puerto Rican misled by his evil friends into criminal actions, and aspiring to take him in as Hattie has taken in the pregnant Jewish woman of the Holocaust during the process of childbirth. Even the crucial scenes in which the hysterical Hattie compares the labor room of a New York hospital to a concentration camp are so enveloped in feminist rhetoric that many a reader (especially today) will forget that their point (as the author herself has felt obliged to explain)\(^9\) is to finalize the identification between Hattie and the women whose stories she has heard in the Eichmann trial, not to present women as the oppressed race.

Daring, even brilliant, as is the central idea of *Touching Evil*, it would have been far more daring if Rosen had made
the heroine who seeks to identify with the Jewish victims of Hitler through the shared burden of motherhood a Jew herself. For in no respect has the refusal of most American Jewish writers to allow their awareness of Jewish history and of the Holocaust to impinge on their depiction of American Jewish life shown itself so glaringly as in their relentless attack upon “the Jewish mother.” This well-known monster of American fiction, who suffocates her offspring with egoism parading as affection, was created not merely in willful ignorance of what Singer calls “the generations-old dolor of the Jewish mother . . . who bled and suffered so that murderers should have victims of their knives,” but with a stolid, almost stupid refusal to consider that the paralyzing dilemmas faced by hundreds of thousands of Jewish mothers in Hitler’s Europe might just possibly have touched the consciousness and affected the behavior of at least a few of their American counterparts.

Just how great was the failure of awareness, how monstrous the thoughtlessness, of the Jewish writers who invented this caricature should be evident to anyone who reads Anya (1974), by Susan F. Schaeffer. The extraordinary achievement of this novel, probably the best American literary work on the Holocaust, cannot be conveyed by a description of just one of its themes; but nowhere is its special power to convey the enormity of Jewish suffering during the destruction process more evident than in its depiction of the agony of Jewish mothers. Susan Schaeffer has given to all those nameless and unremembered women who were forced to choose between life and a mother’s loyalty to her child, or—more horrible yet—between the relatively “easy” death of the gas chamber and that death in the burning pit which she would share with her child if she did not abandon him, “a monument and a memorial.”

Anya is a historical novel in the form of a memoir written by Anya Savikin some years after she is brought to New York from the D.P. camps. It is truly historical—and uniquely dignified—in that the author refuses to distance herself from the woman who tells the story through irony or
the wisdom of hindsight. Rather, she tries to view the events of the Holocaust cataclysm as they would have appeared to an ordinarily intelligent person caught up in them. In fact, not only Susan Schaeffer, but the fifty-two-year-old woman who tells her own story, in 1973, resists the temptation to separate herself from the young woman who endures the war years. We are made to feel how an eighteen-year-old assimilated Jewish girl spending her summers at elegant resorts and reading *Mein Kampf* in a hammock might very well dismiss it, as Anya does, as “a fairy tale.” The novel takes us over much of the familiar Holocaust terrain—prewar pogroms in Poland, the invasion and bombardment of Warsaw, selections, killing by shooting and killing by gas; yet invariably the writer makes us feel that we are experiencing these things afresh, seeing them with new eyes. She tells, with a wealth of detail that is part of the novel’s meaning, of the life of her wealthy, assimilated family in Poland before the war, of the arrest, torture, and murder of her father, sister, brothers, husband, and, finally, mother; of her own suffering in the camps, and of her miraculous escapes and survival, made possible by her determination to save her daughter.

The novel is as much about memory as about the Holocaust. Anya tells us that her great wish had always been to be taken over by “the continuity of life”: to marry, to bear children, to accumulate the physical record of family memory in pictures and furniture and jewelry; then, at the last, to die a normal death. Perhaps no writer since Thomas Hardy (as poet) has expressed so well as Schaeffer the paradoxical way in which material possessions form the texture of a life, and make us human. When she and her family are brought to the killing center at Ponary, Anya feels that their lives depend most of all on her ability to retain through memory the world—only ten blocks away in their apartment in Vilna—from which they are now separated by what seem “huge deep cliffs filled with violent water.” “I started to picture the stove. It seemed very important that I remember every detail, as if all our lives depended on it.” That in some sense they *do* depend on it is
recognized by the Germans as well. Thus, when Anya visits a ravaged Warsaw much later in the story, a Polish cart-driver tells her how the Germans killed not only people, but the trees and the furniture. “‘Kill all the furniture?’ I echoed helplessly. ‘You know, couches, chairs, credenzas, kill them. There should be nothing left for anyone to come back to.’” When you are living in what Anya’s mother taught her to call “biblical times,” the boundaries between what is living and what is dead are obliterated. For Anya, at the end of the war, the dead are more real than the living, and memory serves not to retain that which still exists but to recover that which is no more. It is a dangerous but indispensable faculty: “Then I opened the box: There was Momma’s big diamond ring, and Poppa’s diamond ring, and her pin, my diploma, my index from medical school, the pictures of Stajoe and me near the rock at Druzgeniekie. . . . But something had escaped from the box like a dangerous gas. It was time, old time. I had to take care not to breathe it in.” That massive infusion of the details of everyday life that has characterized the realistic novel since Thackeray finds in this novel its true justification. By conveying so richly the fullness of an individual life, Schaeffer, without more than glancing at the dimensions of the Holocaust, makes us see how far beyond imagining is the loss of six million lives, each of them a treasure house of association and memory.

When she has lost almost everything and everyone, Anya must be taught by her mother how and why to survive. The elder Mrs. Savikin, a splendid character who both understands and embodies the naturalness of custom, insists that even in the Vilna ghetto her daughter must comb and wash and put on lipstick if she wants to retain the human image and survive. When the ghetto is being liquidated, the order goes out that all women with children are to be killed. “Some of the women heard it and ran away from their children. ‘How could they do it?’ I asked Momma. ‘Everything for life,’ she answered dully; ‘everything to live.’” Then Anya and her mother are sent in opposite directions at the segregation point, the younger to live, for a while, the older to die at once. Anya tries to stay with her
mother, but to no avail; and the last words of the mother whom she will never see again are: “‘You will live! You have someone for whom to live!’” This is her way of reminding Anya of what she has already taught her by example: that the continuity of life for which she had hoped now resides in the daughter Ninka, who has been hidden with a Christian family. The little girl has become the repository of all those destroyed lives. “‘She is the photograph album,’ I thought, seeing myself turn the pages with Momushka.”

The last segment of the novel takes place in the United States, where Anya has settled with her second husband, a survivor of Auschwitz. When the war ended, she had decided at once: “‘I am going to Palestine, or America.’” But her choice was made for her by the Communists, NKVD parading as Zionists, who arrested her and so blocked her way to Palestine. America threatens, actually and symbolically, the desecration of her experience and the spoliation of her memories. Having escaped the European inferno, she must now be plagued by the predators on the streets of New York. On Yom Kippur, the family’s apartment is burglarized and the treasured family photos stolen: “It was a tragedy for me, a real tragedy. I had so little of them left.” Worse still, she is disappointed in the daughter, the recipient of all her love who now turns out to be herself unloving. But the memories are by now fixed in her mind, independently of the photos. Her dismay over her daughter is lessened when she recalls two women living in California who had saved themselves by hiding when Gestapo officers held up their children and asked the mothers to step forward. She cannot understand mothers who could abandon their children, but she does not condemn them, for “there were no normal lives during the war, no ethical lives.” Nevertheless, when she says that even now, in the safe haven of the United States, “I cannot even leave my living child alone for one second,” Susan Schaeffer does not invite us to sneer but to see and understand.

It is in the United States that Anya reflects (virtually for
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The last time) on the meaning of all that has happened, to her and to the Jewish people. Although her Jewish illiteracy ran deep, she had begun to feel her way toward a belief in God from the time when, as a girl in medical school, she had been saved by an accident of fate from a horrible pogrom perpetrated against Jewish girls by the other medical students. She sat in perplexity with her mother after the event, thinking "'What for, the chosen people, what for? Chosen for what? For this, to be endlessly persecuted, just because we are Jewish?' And it was then I began to believe. Even the endless persecution was a form of being chosen." Why, she now asks, was she saved when all the rest of her family went under? "Always I felt this hand over me. Always, I was the lucky one." But her world was obliterated, "destroyed, erased, as if it were less than a spelling lesson on the blackboard," and now the Jews are reduced to the humiliation of accepting reparation money, as if one could offer compensation for a whole world, "nothing less than the globe my father's hand rested on."

If her own survival remains a mystery to her, the Holocaust itself remains a greater one. Was the Holocaust perhaps a punishment for intermarriage? "Sometimes I think it is a payment for our new country, for Israel." Anya can never come to any definite conclusions. Her reflections are presented not for their profundity but for their conformity to her experience, with which they keep pace. She has no interest whatever in finding out what "other, wiser people" think it all meant, for "Who can know what it meant? I don't believe anyone can. So I satisfy myself with simple answers that suit the weather of the day." Anya's impulse to understand her experience comes to rest not with what Bellow's Mr. Sammler contemptuously refers to as "explanations" but with her sitting down to put her feelings on paper. In the last page of the book, she re-creates and recovers her destroyed family in a dream, in a new house, which will not vanish, and which in fact comprises the novel that stands before us, a triumph over time.

American Jewish Holocaust writing concentrates most of its attention on the problems of individuals, whether they
are survivors, like Anya or like Bellow's Artur Sammler, or American Jews who belatedly react to what they had watched from a distance, or perhaps not watched at all. For the most part, its characters are not participants in a process of rebirth and recovery that involves them with the Jewish people as a whole or even with the Jews of their own country. When the hero of Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), upon hearing news of the outbreak of the war in 1967, hastens to secure a journalistic assignment that will take him to Israel, he is fleeing what suddenly strikes him as the historical irrelevance of Jewish America. The contrast here with the literature of Israel may seem unsurprising. Yet it requires some explanation if we take at all seriously the claims made by American Jewry, usually implicitly but sometimes explicitly, that the American Jewish community, by far the largest in the world in numbers since the destruction of European Jewry, is a continuator and an inheritor of that ravaged civilization as much as Israel is, and has if not an equal then at least a unique role to play in the Jewish future. Only two American Jewish writers have tried to grapple with this question, and to imagine a communal response to the Holocaust that is creative and that does not consist of the answer: Israel. The alternative answers can also be identified by place-names: Yavneh and Bene Brak.

In 1969 and 1970, Cynthia Ozick published, within a period of a few months, a short story and an essay that defined two American Jewish responses to the Holocaust and the relation between them. The story, a small masterpiece, was entitled “Envy; or, Yiddish in America.”

In it she ironically but affectionately re-created the ambience of American Yiddish writers, for whom continuation of Yiddish, the language of the majority of the victims of the Holocaust, constitutes the most meaningful form of Jewish survival. “A little while ago,” writes one of the story’s characters, “there were twelve million people . . . who lived inside this tongue, and now what is left? A language that never had a territory except Jewish mouths, and half the Jewish mouths on earth already
stopped up with German worms. The rest jabber Russian, English, Spanish, God knows what. . . . In Israel they give the language of Solomon to machinists. Rejoice—in Solomon's time what else did the mechanics speak? Yet whoever forgets Yiddish courts amnesia of history.” The story conveys its author’s profound dissatisfaction with what one of the characters archly refers to as “so-called Amer.-Jewish writers.” It conveys too the sense that Yiddish and Hebrew have now, because of the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel, exchanged their traditional roles within Jewish life, with Yiddish, now the language of martyrdom, acquiring a sacred status, and Hebrew, used (often badly) by bus-drivers and peddlers of unkosher meat in Tel Aviv, becoming the language of the folk and the street. Yet this very transformation and elevation of Yiddish into the language of a coterie, who seek meaning and salvation through continuing to write in it, would itself seem the final confirmation that Yiddish language and literature, which for centuries actually did perform many of the functions of a homeland for people who had none, can no longer do so. The elegiac note in this mainly comic story can be deeply moving: “'In Talmud if you save a single life it's as if you saved the world. And if you save a language? Worlds maybe. Galaxies. The whole universe.'” But how can a language itself in need of salvation save others?

Cynthia Ozick sought an answer to this question in her lecture/essay of 1970 entitled “America: Toward Yavneh.” Yavneh traditionally and literally, of course, refers to the place in which, in the year 70, following the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans, the sage Yohanan ben Zakkai established an academy that became the spiritual center of Judaism after the nation ceased to be an independent political entity. Yavneh continued to flourish as a religious center: in it the canon of the Bible was formulated and the Mishnah was begun. Thus Judaism could be said to have survived and, in one sense, flourished even after the Jewish Commonwealth was no more.

By applying, however tentatively, the term Yavneh to
America, Ozick does not, like some subsequent exploiters of this metaphor, intend to congratulate American Jewry on a moral or intellectual character superior to that of Israeli Jews. On the contrary, she makes clear that American Jews for the most part remain in their corner of the Exile because they love to be flattered for having those very traits that are so easily (and often fraudulently) claimed by people without power or responsibility, their devotion to "Mankind" (rather than to Jews), their pacific character, their wide-spreading, indiscriminate philanthropy. "In America . . . the fleshpots are spiritual. The reason we do not Ingather is not because of our material comforts, but because of our spiritual self-centeredness." Indeed, her whole thrust up to this point in her essay is that when the Jews went into Exile their capacity for literature seemed to abandon them, especially when they chose to address, as most American Jewish writers still do address, the principle of "Mankind" rather than the culture and problems of their own people. Nevertheless, she finally expresses the hope that just as Spain was for a time in the Middle Ages a sort of Jerusalem Displaced, so can America be.

"'Yavneh,'" she says, "is an impressionistic term, a metaphor suggesting renewal. The original Academy at Yavneh was founded after the destruction of the Temple; the new one in prospect coincides with the restoration of Zion." She expresses the hope that the Yavneh of America can share responsibility for Jewish destiny with the Jews of Israel. In a kind of division of labor scheme for the reconstruction of a shattered people, she envisions Jerusalem as the healer of wounds, the bringer of health, the safekeeper, and Yavneh America as "the Aggadists, the makers-of-literature." Although most of her essay has demonstrated, rather conclusively, that Diaspora culture has been largely a disaster, and that "there are no major works of Jewish imaginative genius written in any Gentile language, sprung out of any Gentile culture," she now makes a declaration of faith in the ability of American Jewry to preserve itself by making a new culture. This
culture will itself be partly the result of the restoration of Israel, partly the result of the Holocaust, and yet it will have its own character, its own principle of life.

The main instrument of this reconstruction will be a creative union between Yiddish and English that Ozick labels New Yiddish, and that she hopes will become, just as "old" Yiddish was, "the language of multitudes of Jews, spoken to Jews by Jews, written by Jews for Jews." If doubters ask who is to invent such a language, her answer is that it has already been invented, that her essay itself is written in it, that Norma Rosen's *Touching Evil* and Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* are novelistic examples of it. Just as a dialect of Middle High German was once changed into Yiddish by being made the instrument of Jewish peoplehood, Jewish necessities, so too can English be transformed into New Yiddish by Jewish writers who have found their proper subject—the Holocaust and Jewish fate—and can transmute the characteristic rhythms and intonations of Yiddish into English.  

Although few readers have failed to be impressed by Cynthia Ozick's brilliance of mind and style, many come away from the essay feeling that she is something like the magician who puts eggs into a hat and brings forth—eggs. Her procedure is similar to that of the Gothic revivalists of the nineteenth century who thought to recreate the civilization of the Middle Ages by imitating its architecture, even as they maintained that all architecture was inevitably an index of the ethical values of the civilization that produced it. But if criticism cannot create a new culture, perhaps it can, as Matthew Arnold believed, create a new literature. Cynthia Ozick's call for American Jewish culture to assume, alongside Israeli Jewish culture, responsibility for the reconstruction of Jewish life, has already stirred a response among younger writers, most notably in Arthur A. Cohen's *In the Days of Simon Stern* (1973). This novel, garrulous, pedantic, and badly structured, is nevertheless rich in idea and imaginative power, and unique among the works of American fiction we have surveyed.
in two respects. It views the Holocaust from the perspective of Jewish religion, and it attempts to imagine, in America, a collective rather than individual response to the destruction of European Jewry.

The novel’s narrator is blind Nathan Gaza, a survivor of Auschwitz whose name calls up that of the prophet of Sabbatai Zevi, the false messiah of the seventeenth century who appealed to the desperate hopes of masses of Jews in the aftermath of unprecedented massacre. Nathan tells his story in English, but deplores its inadequacy as a language of prophecy and says he uses it only because Simon Stern, who thought English second only to Hebrew, demanded it. Nathan tells the story of Simon Stern, whose parents were informed, before his birth in 1899, that their son would be the Messiah, but that his emergence would be contingent on their own death. Simon does not learn of his identity until much later, in fact, just after he learns from the modern Elijah, Chaim Weizmann, in his Madison Square Garden speech of 1943, that two million Jews have already been killed. No sooner does Weizmann say that “we are being destroyed by a conspiracy of silence” than Simon is stricken with impotence, forever incapable of physical love because his creative destiny must be fulfilled in other realms. He now receives the letter that his father had written him in 1899 telling him that he is the Messiah. The linkage between the death of his parents by fire in the previous year and the death of two million Jews quickens his sense of mission. “Why is it always so,” asked Simon’s father in his revelatory letter, “that good should come out of evil?” Up to this time in his life, Simon’s messianic energies have gone into the accumulation of sixty million dollars’ worth of real estate. But the simultaneous revelation of his messianic destiny and of the destruction of the Jews of Europe raises the question of whether what the Book of Daniel calls “the time of beating wings” is at hand. Nathan, true to his prophetic role, reflects: “The world, it is said, will be saved either when it has become so transparently magnificent that the Messiah appears as a reward or when
it aches so from misery that the Messiah comes like a medicine. But there’s a third way. The Messiah comes into our midst when men are speechless."

Although Simon and his friends do place advertisements in the *New York Times* informing the nation of the details and magnitude of the slaughter and urging the Allies to bomb the death camps, they do not undertake political action. Simon dreams of confronting Roosevelt over his callous refusal to ransom the Jews and take them in, but his dream is not translated into action. Simon gives five million dollars to endow a Society for the Rescue and Resurrection of the Jews, whose actions during the war are fictional confirmation of the accusation (made by Hilberg and others) that in the midst of the slaughter American Jews thought, when they thought at all, not of political action to effect rescue but of postwar salvage operations. Simon’s society has as its primary purpose the preparation of centers and domiciles for the restoration to the remnant—for, as the Bible says, there always *is* a remnant—of their souls as well as their bodies.

Cohen himself is more interested in pursuing the idea of a separate destiny for post-Holocaust American Jewry than in a political critique of the American Jewish community during the war. Whereas in *Anya* the heroine ends up in America purely by accident, here the decision to go to America rather than to Eretz Israel is a conscious one, forced by Simon Stern. Simon actually goes to the D.P. camps to select the choice survivors and urge them to go to New York with him rather than to Palestine. "‘Some will want to go and cannot. Others will not want to go and I will persuade you to come.’" As if to emphasize the competitive character of the choice, Cohen shows Simon’s speech to the survivors precipitating a battle between the two factions. "There was a momentary silence as the assembly considered his invitation and then a cry went up: ‘To America. To America.’ And others replied, ‘To the Land. To the Land. Eretz Yisrael.’ Fists hit against the air and arms struck out against others."
Eventually the refugees are brought to New York, and the process of rehabilitation begins. Simon Stern envisions, not exactly a Yavneh, but “a small Bene Brak as in the days after the destruction of the ancient temple,” a Bene Brak in New York City that will bear witness that “‘despite all, everything, Jews will endure.’” The original Bene Brak, like the original Yavneh, became important only in the first century of this era, when, following the destruction in Jerusalem, a group of sages moved there and made it into a famous seat of learning, where Rabbi Akiva established his great academy. The very idea that a Bene Brak could arise in New York City after the Holocaust constitutes an audacious challenge to modern Israel’s role as the rightful inheritor of the destroyed Jewish civilization of Europe.

The task of giving a semblance of civility to a community of survivors of bestiality is engaged with energy. Simon is proclaimed Messiah at a meeting of the Society, and the “endurers” begin to rebuild a Temple replica as well as to regain the pride, courage, and tenacity of the Jews who built the original. But from this high point all is decline and dissolution: we have had no more than what Nathan calls “a fulfilled moment.” The same may be said of the novel itself, for the idea of building a restored Jewish civilization in New York City is even more quixotic than that of building it on a new literary language. Cohen is prepared for this objection, which is met by one of his characters, who says that really there is “no difference between Simon Stern and David Ben-Gurion. He drew none of the haughty distinctions between those who build castles in the sky and those who build castles in the sand.” Once again, we meet the notion of a division of labor between the two inheritors of the Jewish remnant, Israel and Diaspora. But here the idea has an enormous arrogance absent from Cynthia Ozick’s formulation. For in truth the speaker asserts not equality between the partners but the superior spirituality of the partner whose castles are built only in the air. True, the castles in the sky built in New York and those in sand built in Eretz Israel are both shaky and unstable, but “the former were the constructions of visionaries and the latter
the constructions of unskilled engineers. The fact that the visionaries had kept the People alive for thousands of years was proof enough that the engineers would in time learn their trade.” There could be no more stunning illustration than this of what Hillel Halkin has called the tendency of some American Jewish intellectuals to imagine the entire Jewish people “with its body in the East and its soul in the West.”

Despite its shortcomings, In the Days of Simon Stern asks important questions about the political and theological implications of the Holocaust, questions either prohibited or tacitly avoided by most American Jewish writing. It forces us to look back at the conduct of American Jewry and of Jewry’s favorite senators and president during the Holocaust and to ask whether, in Simon’s words, “the murderers are . . . the ones who do not pay attention.” It also explores, with more audacity than perhaps any work except Moshe Flinker’s diary and Nelly Sachs’s poetry the bearing of the Holocaust upon the ancient Jewish idea that messianic redemption will come through historical catastrophe. Above all, it suggests a new future for American Jewish writing by opening the question of how to reorganize Judaism in the Diaspora after the European Diaspora has been destroyed, and of how American Jewish culture can assume, alongside Israeli Jewish culture, responsibility for the reconstruction of Jewish life.

The Holocaust has, then, finally become a subject of American Jewish fiction, finally made itself felt as an event of Jewish history and significance. This ought to be a cause of satisfaction, even if it is a strange satisfaction that comes from assimilating to the imagination a catastrophe that befell us over three decades ago. But, alas, we have no time to enjoy even this qualified satisfaction, for the Jews do not seem able to extricate themselves from the storm center of modern history. If world events and American policy continue on their present course, American Jews may once again find themselves faced with a tragic choice between their identity as members of the Jewish people and their
identity as American citizens. If our writers have at last begun to equip us for tragedy, they will at least have saved us from the worst calamity.

4. The other, "The German Refugee," tells of a Jewish survivor in New York, who kills himself after learning that his Gentile wife had converted to Judaism, been arrested despite her mother's proof of the daughter's origins to police, and then murdered in Poland.
8. Ibid.
9. "The Holocaust and the American-Jewish Novelist," p. 59. That the possibility of confusion on this point is not to be underestimated is demonstrated by the extraordinary phenomenon that involves the identification of Sylvia Plath as a Holocaust poet. Irving Howe, in his essay "The Plath Celebration," remarks on Sylvia Plath's habit of identifying her own difficulties with her father with the Jews' suffering at the hands of the Nazis, that "there is something monstrous, utterly disproportionate, when tangled emotions about one's father are deliberately compared with the historical fate of the European Jews; something sad, if the comparison is made spontaneously" (The Critical Point [New York: Delta, 1975], p. 166).
11. See above, note 5.
13. That even the most famous practitioner of New Yiddish—Saul Bellow—does not seem to know he is using this new language is an embarrassment Cynthia Ozick deals with in her short essay, "Hanging the Ghetto Dog," New York Times Book Review, 21 March 1976.
15. On this point, see Alvin Rosenfeld's important review in Midstream 19 (August/September 1973): 72-75.
With an effort which up till now has never been repeated I managed to reach the cultural level of an average European. In itself that might be nothing to speak of, but it is something insofar as it has helped me out of my cage and opened a special way out for me, the way of humanity.—The ape in Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy”