

Disciplining Traumatic History

Goldhagen's "Impropriety"

The revered German historian Hans Mommsen concludes his critique of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*¹ with a carefully considered judgment: "The corrosive sharpness with which Goldhagen charges the Germans with a will to 'demonic anti-Semitism'—and to make them out not as accomplices but as generally eager perpetrators—is certainly not suited (*sicherlich nicht geeignet*) to laying *ressentiment* to rest (*stillzulegen*) and is anything but helpful in facilitating a sober confrontation with the past directly in light of the present."² Mommsen condemns his young American colleague for inappropriately making blanket statements about "the Germans" and contends that Goldhagen's method of representing them as enthusiastic perpetrators is unsuitable for the task of quieting *ressentiment*. This judgment follows a discussion that begins with the thesis that Goldhagen's book does not really justify the inflamed debate surrounding it. Indeed, it "plainly lags behind the current state of research, rests on broadly insufficient foundations, and brings no new insights to bear on answering the question of why it became possible for an advanced and highly civilized country to relapse into barbarism, into the systematic liquidation of millions of innocent human beings—here, primarily, of Jews."³

Given these considerable problems, one is struck with the book's success in provoking the likes of Mommsen without being worth the ink that he and others spill in its name. Surely, the inflamed territorial tendencies of professional historians cannot account for all of the sound and fury in the discussion preceding and immediately following the publication of its German translation in August 1996. Moreover, the historians' responses contrast curiously with the book's popularity among the German public—after it was translated, it immediately sold out. Geoff Eley and Atina Grossmann

have coined the term “*Goldhagen effect*” to characterize the almost ecstatic public enthusiasm that greeted the German version and its author’s triumphal speaking tour, restricted to (formerly) West German cities. Eley surmises that by bringing “the sober and meticulous institutional histories of policy-making down to the ground, showing what they meant in the actions of deliberate and willful individuals,” Goldhagen “made it harder to escape the upsetting reality of Holocaust violence,”⁴ or, in Jane Caplan’s sharp phrasing, the “unmediated moment of individual choice” as the perpetrators “faced and destroyed their victims: as Germans slaughtered Jews.”⁵

Writing in *Ha’aretz* in 1997, Ilana Hammermann highlights Goldhagen’s tendency to magnify the details of how the perpetrators singled out the Jews in face-to-face interactions of violence and murder. In this manner, he seemingly “calls upon the reader ‘to reach for his sword . . . and take revenge against the monster’ but at the same time enables him ‘to calm himself, since there is no one to slay anymore.’”⁶ Hammermann’s caustic observation postulates an angry longing for revenge as the underlying ground for the popular response to Goldhagen’s “pamphlet” (as she dismissively refers to it), particularly among American Jews, who, as Omer Bartov reminds us, were “probably Goldhagen’s most avid consumers in the United States.”⁷ Caplan supports this interpretation when she points to Goldhagen’s frequent use of the pronoun “we” along with his “repeated ‘thick’ descriptions of the subjective experience of killing,” which “are calculated to induce both negative and positive identifications on the part of the reader: a repudiation of the motives and choices that underlay the horrifying acts of the killers, and an empathetic identification with the suffering of their victims.” Goldhagen invites his American readers in particular to take comfort in knowing that they “stand on the morally sound side of the partitioned world of guilt and innocence that it presents”—to see themselves as the “heirs of Enlightenment values” while distinguishing themselves from the “alien values and ‘radically different’ culture” of the Germans. Such ploys are what constitute for Caplan the core strategy of *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*: “the logic of how it positions its readers.”⁸

Hammermann’s and Caplan’s comments emphasize Goldhagen’s ability to mobilize readers’ identifications with a righteous anger and desire for revenge, albeit futile, against “the Germans.” It is this effect that has apparently touched a tender nerve of Holocaust historiography: the persistence of Jewish resentment that sixty-five years of liberal-democratic rehabilitation in Germany have failed “to put to rest” (*stillzulegen*).⁹ Though critics have typically derided the “viscerality” of Goldhagen’s style,¹⁰ his rage tends to fall outside of the theoretical purview of the illustrious historians focusing on the book’s methodological flaws, of which, to be sure, there is no dearth. In this chapter, I want to reflect on the antidisciplinary status of Goldhagen’s resentment, which seemingly eludes historicization.

Goldhagen's Impropriety

It is not surprising that historians would blanch at the baldness of Goldhagen's tone. The expression of resentment in a scholarly work troubles the unspoken etiquette that historians typically respect in attempting to produce objective-seeming accounts. This is the case insofar as historical writing should at the very least appear not to take sides in order to be considered objective. "Appropriate" history might not be able to escape the task of making judgments, but it avoids grandstanding. "Proper" history implicitly condemns without offending.

Mommsen claims that Goldhagen's approach is unsuitable for a historical reflection that should seek to defuse rather than to fan the fires of resentment. This assessment connotes that Goldhagen transgresses the tacit codes of acceptable scientific communication and conduct, that it is, somehow, *improper*. On the flip side, reproaching a survivor's son for expressing anger about German cruelty during the Third Reich also seems "inappropriate" in failing to respect the traumatic impact of mass murder. For while one might expect a Harvard scholar to examine opposing evidence and arguments, is it not unjust to demand polite composure in the case of genocide? Indeed, why should historians be courteous and neutral when describing mass murder and other atrocities? Should not the magnitude of such crimes be allowed to derail the rules of civility respecting scholarly discourse?

Admittedly, this way of posing the problem is misleading. In the case of recent history such as the Holocaust, there is no question of "allowing" this trauma to affect historical writing. Assessing its impact on the writing of history belongs to the work of understanding the specificity of the Shoah as an historical event. For this reason, Goldhagen's resentment should not be punished and summarily dismissed as a failure of rationality, but might instead be taken seriously as an object of inquiry in its own right.

I stage this defense of the scientific and moral propriety of Goldhagen's resentment in order to highlight the behavioral and stylistic codes that determine acceptable approaches to the Holocaust. When scholars have recourse to notions of propriety, they draw on a nexus of models, expectations, and protocols that define a *disciplined* (i.e., *consistently rigorous*) approach to an object of inquiry. The ideal of rigor thus exerts a normative power to determine the parameters of the object of inquiry, to establish the ethics of its representation, and to regulate membership in the discourse community that focuses on it. As Robert Eaglestone understands it, historical rigor is not scientific; rather, it "stems from the genre or discourse rules of the discipline of history itself."¹¹ Though I agree with this distinction, I find that historians tend to use the terms *rigor* and *science* interchangeably in debates about historiography. When such rules are broken down in terms of their

function, it nevertheless becomes clear how “science” operates as an implicitly moralizing regulative ideal and as a rhetorical effect that professional scholars can reproduce if they obey the rules (as Eaglestone contends).

These functions might be differentiated in accordance with the following rubrics. In the first place, there are *substantive* criteria that demarcate the spatial, temporal, and otherwise factual and thematic contents of the historical object. In the second place, there are *epistemological* criteria that dictate how and to what extent the object of inquiry can be validly known.¹² Third, the fairness and persuasive force of any history will be assessed on the basis of *moral* criteria, which determine the *propriety* of these representations as bearers of social and cultural meanings and as vehicles for furthering certain ethical and political aims. Here and in the four subsequent chapters, I use the term *moral* to refer to the force of deeply held, emotionally charged, and not always fully conscious ideas about the way things should be. The term *morality* is sometimes distinguished from *ethics*, which translates values into codes of conduct for specific situations. In effect, disciplinary protocols are always ethical in this sense, since values mediate decisions about what aspects of an event should be included or merit more attention than others. Fourth, insofar as no one account can depict every aspect of the past, *stylistic* and *rhetorical* conventions guide the work of historians seeking to produce an *intelligible*, *persuasive*, and *sufficiently complete* representation of the available scholarship.

It should be noted that the four functions involved in the judgment of disciplinary propriety can be distinguished formally but are, in practice, inextricably bound: all four sets of standards inform decisions about which facts will be excluded and how those included will be ordered and weighed in the interests of emphasis and readability. As Hayden White contends, the “governing metaphor of an historical account could be treated as a heuristic rule which self-consciously eliminates certain kinds of data from consideration as evidence.”¹³ My emphasis, as an extension of White’s standpoint, is that the metaphors and narratives that organize content are also social to the extent that they regulate scholarly writing as a mode of professional conduct. Hence the judgment of appropriate behavior is also at stake in evaluations of historical accounts as “just” (valid, reliable, thorough, fair, or respectful) representations of an object.

It will be difficult to say anything about the relationship between scientific and moral propriety that has not already been anticipated by White’s keen observation that “historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events of which it treats.”¹⁴ My interest in the Goldhagen controversy centers on the problems that arise when scientific protocols are alternately opposed to or confused with an ethics of representation in Nazi-period historiography. The locus of this problematic is a perceived split or convergence between scientific and moral notions of propriety where the former derives from the rules for evaluating and configuring evidence and the latter from a feeling that we

must respect the traumatic magnitude of mass murder and not discount its perpetrators' responsibility. This problematic conspicuously informs reactions to Goldhagen's refusal to honor the protocols of a scientifically neutral approach when he allows his resentment to distort his presentation of German atrocities.

There are, to be sure, numerous substantive and methodological justifications for the "chorus of dismissal" among professional historians commenting on Goldhagen's overhyped scholarly "intervention."¹⁵ In contrast to his nemesis, Christopher Browning, whom Goldhagen treats arrogantly, he refuses to weigh the prospect of ambivalent readings of the documents he examines. He consequently produces a monocausal picture of *certain* Germans' behavior and then compounds this "baldest of essentializing generalizations"¹⁶ by extending it to the wartime German populace as a whole. Goldhagen's assertion of the primacy of German anti-Semitism as a spur to genocide is not a new insight, and Mommsen has a point when he calls the younger scholar's self-proclaimed originality into question. Anson Rabinbach notes that Goldhagen "offers a version of German history as a long preamble to murder, an approach that dismisses the Holocaust as a 'modern' event" in presenting it "as a passionate crime of ethnic hatred deeply rooted in Germany's long history of anti-Semitism."¹⁷ Yet even though Goldhagen forsakes a comparatist approach in portraying the long-term evolution of a virulent "eliminationist" anti-Semitic *Weltanschauung*, "religious in origin, which, since the time of Martin Luther, had festered beneath the surface of German society,"¹⁸ he fails to engage the so-called *Sonderweg* ("special path") thesis that attributes Germany's early twentieth-century authoritarian and illiberal "deviation" to its belated development as a unified state in comparison with other liberal Western nations.¹⁹ Michael Brennan remarks that Goldhagen offsets "a universal[izing] agency for domination" among the Germans by a reified notion of Jewish victimhood. He thus "'exoticizes' the Holocaust as an exclusively Jewish and German affair" while foreclosing "wider considerations of communities implicated in events"—among them, those who resisted, non-Jewish victims, and those who also collaborated.²⁰ Moreover, in the few instances where he cites contradictory evidence, Goldhagen does not allow it to qualify his argument about "ordinary" Germans.²¹ Indeed, the prevailing rhetorical gesture of the book is a flat and flippant dismissal of opposing research, the discussion of which Goldhagen typically leaves to the footnotes while "aggressively blazing his lone path" as a "fighter against an established and self-satisfied academic elite."²² The painful lack of intellectual integrity is not helped by his recourse to ironies that are at once too easy and too pointed. Ultimately, poor editing makes these problems all the more annoying because they are repetitive.

Mommsen raises the question as to how it became possible for "an advanced and highly civilized land" to liquidate millions of innocent people, and the Jews "above all," yet in Goldhagen's view, the answer to Mommsen's

question “goes without saying”: the Germans murdered the Jews because they were thoroughly, relentlessly, and transhistorically anti-Semitic.²³ When commanded to massacre entire villages, to drive humans into cattle cars, and to shoot small children at point-blank range, they could only justify their obedience as the reversal of all other deeply entrenched value systems through a remorseless belief that the Jews were not, in fact, human. They were reviled as *Fremdkörper* (alien bodies) suited for slavery, experimentation, and extermination.²⁴

While Mommsen’s criticism of *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* obviously does not deny these facts, he cannot validate Goldhagen’s rage. Instead, he worries that Goldhagen’s book will reinforce resentment rather than quieting it: his “portrayal of sadistic and gruesome violence releases a certain voyeuristic moment that serious research about the Holocaust has deliberately avoided in its restrained portrayal of the crimes, particularly since it translates at best into mere *Betroffenheit* (affectation of dismay) and contributes little toward real explanation.”²⁵ Mommsen’s anxiety may be justified, as the following passage suggests, since Goldhagen minces no words in establishing the personal and sadistic disposition of German cruelty:

The men of Police Battalion 309 used the marketplace near the Jewish districts to assemble the Jews. . . . *The Germans* took hundreds of Jews from the marketplace to nearby sites, where they shot them. Yet the killing was proceeding too slowly for *the Germans’* taste. . . . *The Germans*, without precise orders about the methods by which to achieve their ends, took their own initiative (as they so often were to do during the Holocaust) in devising a new course of action. . . . The men of Police Battalion 309’s First and Third Companies drove their victims into the synagogue, the less compliant Jews receiving from *the Germans* liberal blows of encouragement. *The Germans* packed the large synagogue full. The fearful Jews began to chant and pray loudly. After spreading gasoline around the building, *the Germans* set it ablaze; one of the men tossed an explosive through a window, to ignite the holocaust. The Jews’ prayers turned into screams. A battalion member later described the scene that he witnessed: “I saw . . . smoke, that came out of the synagogue and heard there how the incarcerated people cried loudly for help. I was about 70 meters’ distance from the synagogue. I could see the building and observed that people tried to escape through the windows. One shot at them. Circling the synagogue stood the police members who were apparently supposed to cordon it off, in order to ensure that no one emerged.” Between 100 and 150 men of the battalion surrounded the burning synagogue. They collectively ensured that none of the appointed Jews escaped the inferno. They watched as over seven hundred people died this hid-

eous and painful death, listening to screams of agony. Most of the victims were men, though some women and children were among them. Not surprisingly, some of the Jews within spared themselves the fiery death by hanging themselves or severing their arteries. At least six Jews came running out of the synagogue, their clothes and bodies aflame. *The Germans* shot each one down, only to watch these human torches burn themselves out.

With what emotions did the men of Police Battalion 309 gaze upon this sacrificial pyre to the exterminationist creed? One exclaimed: "Let it burn, it's a nice little fire (*schönes Feuerlein*), it's great fun." Another exulted: "Splendid, the entire city should burn down."²⁶ (My emphasis)

A quick glance at Goldhagen's language in this passage reveals a tone that embraces its own exclamation points and almost seems to rejoice in its failed sobriety. Yet while his illustrations are not subtly presented, neither are they patently exaggerated even as he moves into narrative high gear. His language is openly condemning, and it allows for no exceptions or ambivalence. He crafts his images with dramatic precision, careful to emphasize (and reemphasize) *the Germans'* initiative in carrying out this genocidal "innovation." Goldhagen defends this emphasis in his introduction as a method of stressing the perpetrators' identity and agency. In practice, it has the force of an accusation with each repetition.

The young Harvard scholar is certainly not shy about employing emphatic modifiers to increase our horror in response to the actions of Police Battalion 309 as they burned Jews alive in the Bialystok synagogue. Phrases such as "fiery death," "sacrificial pyre," and "human torch" resonate with the lurid figures of pulp fiction, what Norman G. Finkelstein calls "Holoporn" and Ruth Bettina Birn describes as "the style used in bad historical novels."²⁷ In fairness to his critics, one wonders why an episode that is so tragic and grotesque nevertheless requires dramatic intensification. Does Goldhagen think that his readers will be bored? Or does he assume that they are too simple to imagine that a death by burning is "hideous and painful," and that they will remember the perpetrators' nationality only if he insistently reminds them of it?²⁸

Eley observes, "There are also genuine issues of taste, strategy, and ethical choice involved in choosing to present this in all its vivid awfulness, particularly given the pornographic discourse sometimes associated with the circulation of such images." While he acknowledges the legitimacy of such graphic descriptions, Eley also sympathizes with Goldhagen's predecessors, who were irritated by an approach that effaced "the ethical seriousness" of their work.²⁹ Eley's reference to "taste" clearly targets Goldhagen's "low-brow" conduct, an assessment that reverberates throughout the reviews. The historians are condemning Goldhagen's lack of *class*—his failure, in other words, to

respect what Grossmann refers to as the *Schamgrenze* (shame borders) that well-behaved historians have traditionally honored while recounting the Nazi crimes. Writing for the *New York Review of Books*, the publisher-editor of *Die Zeit*, Josef Joffe, reiterates Jürgen Kocka's observation that "[m]ost historians have used more cautious language" or have, at the very least "scrupulously stopped pointing at 'the Germans'" in the modern literature on the Holocaust. Yet here was Daniel Goldhagen, "slicing through such comforting shibboleths as 'Hitler and his henchmen,' fingering 'the Germans' again."³⁰ "A half century later," Franklin Littell insists, "when the Holocaust . . . is remembered and discussed, sensitivity and a *low tone of voice* are preferable to arrogance and self-righteousness" (my emphasis). The American historian goes still further, implying that Goldhagen's approach exploits "the historical record to undergird a distorted view of 'the Germans,'" which Littell decries as "wrong, morally, academically and politically."³¹

The language of a few of these criticisms beckons us to sexualize Goldhagen's impropriety by insinuating that he enjoys his rage about German cruelty toward the Jews.³² Joffe quotes the "German-Jewish scholar" Dan Diner, who remarks that Goldhagen "describes the cruelties of the perpetrators in all of their opulence." Joffe also cites the sociologist Y. Michal Bodemann, who called the book "pornography" because it "drives home the 'pleasure derived from murder and torture' in a 'voyeuristic narration.'" ³³ Grossmann likewise suggests that Goldhagen obtained "moral authority" among his nonacademic readers through "what seemed to his critics a grotesque, lurid, virtually pornographic language of witness, which could proclaim a certain docudrama authenticity." He "got down to the nitty-gritty graphics of gushing blood and flying body parts with a gusto from which most historians would recoil."³⁴

Carolyn J. Dean observes that his critics' designation of "pornography" renders Goldhagen's language of witness "inextricable from far more suspect pleasures."³⁵ "Calling something 'pornography,'" Dean argues, "is a way of putting aside arguments about the nature of representation in favor of a vague but palpable sense that this image or that text elicits an improper response." It is a label that "passes for an argument about the relation between moral and political perversion where there is really no argument and attributes responsibility for Nazism and fascism implicitly to particular sorts of illicit, sexual emotions."³⁶ Unlike "historians whose allegiance to a neutral narrative voice restrains moral judgment, encouraging a cognitive rather than emotive mode of apprehension," Dean writes, "Goldhagen inserts himself into the action, asking the reader to imagine in the most vivid terms how a German soldier must have felt as he shot a young Jewish child, and he describes the murder in gruesome detail." She infers that the historians' attribution of *pornography* became a way of speaking about his "unrestrained moralism" in a book "that simply did not subscribe to any serious historiographical conventions about distinguishing clearly between

the event and one's subjective judgment of it, between history writing and the evocation of (in this case traumatic) memory."³⁷

What is striking about some of the criticisms of Goldhagen's "pornographic" style is that they also problematize the role of fantasy in historical visualization. Hammermann, for example, "accuses Goldhagen of inventing details of horror that do not exist in his sources, 'a consequence of that (certainly unconscious) seductive pull of the dark need in people's souls to peep as closely as possible, with a mixture of horror and pleasure, at the atrocity being perpetrated on others.'"³⁸ Bartov affirms there is no doubt that certain elements of Goldhagen's description "seem to reflect his own fantasies—themselves most probably the product of (over)exposure to media representations of the Holocaust and other massacres—rather than the information culled from the documentation he cites." He writes: "Goldhagen wants us to imagine with him the thoughts that went through the minds of a German policeman and the little girl he shot, he wants us to imagine what the shooting actually looked like; in short, he demands that we fantasize atrocity and be morally outraged by the horrors conjured up in our minds."³⁹

Such comments are extremely revealing, because they not only enunciate the phantasmatic aspects of Goldhagen's descriptions, but also the ways in which his graphic visualizations *imply a reader who will share them*. In Dean's view, these condemnations of Goldhagen's style suggest that "explicit portrayals of violence must produce a disingenuous emotional response (*Betroffenheit*)," or what she refers to as "corrupted empathy." By implication, the restrained portrayal of violence would instead evoke "proper feelings, though it is not clear why exactly this is the case or what those feelings should be."⁴⁰ Ultimately, however, "whether Goldhagen is a hypocrite or a saint is really beside the point," as Dean observes, "since the text's real difficulty is that its very logic refuses any simple choice between the moral numbness equated with voyeurism and the moral integrity equated with empathy." In effect, those historians who "accuse Goldhagen of being a charlatan or an overly vigilant prosecutor demand that we finally take the side of either good or bad history, of moral numbness or integrity when what the book really exposes is the difficulty involved in writing the history of the genocide of European Jewry." Indeed, as Dean surmises, "[i]t is as if the venom historians' directed at Goldhagen's celebrity was thus a means of disavowing the very difficult question of how best to represent historical knowledge about the Holocaust, a question whose answer was taken to be self-evident. . . ."⁴¹

Dean's analysis of comparisons with pornography in Goldhagen's reception demonstrates how discourse about the Holocaust operates as an index of anxiety about the limits or "fragility" of empathy. Thus, in her assessment, the term *pornography* ultimately attests to critics' "frustration about the inadequacy of conventional moral language to address the Holocaust." This frustration

is then “projected onto a bad object: onto Goldhagen’s work in particular, but also onto its commercial success and thus onto all those nameless and faceless readers who apparently can’t distinguish between titillation and moral gravity, emotional appeals and serious historical work.”⁴² This contention betrays the root of Goldhagen’s “pornographic” tendency. The problem lies with “us” as his “morbidly fascinated” implied readers—with the suspected inadequacy or impropriety of our feelings and perceptions—rather than with any *intrinsic* impropriety on his end.⁴³ It is “we” readers who worry about feeling hailed into identifying too closely “either with the suffering of victims or with the hatred of perpetrators,”⁴⁴ and it is “we” who feel ashamed of being implicated in his tasteless (low-class) behavior, his poor discipline, and also, most acutely perhaps, in the *jouissance* that saturates his lushly detailed spectacles of German cruelty and Jewish agony.

This image of Goldhagen’s implied reader locates part of the seductive force of *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* in the opportunity it provides for its consumers to satisfy a scopophilic fascination with transgressive violence and to relish alternately sadistic identifications with perpetrators and masochistic identifications with victims. The warm reception of the book indicates that his German and American audiences likely took advantage of the occasion for voyeuristic pleasure that the professional historians rejected with disgust; nevertheless, as Bartov notes, Goldhagen’s “insistence on the most explicit aspects of the horror must have, at the same time, been quite familiar to [American] readers exposed to a tremendous number of real and staged representations of violence in the media.” For Americans, Goldhagen’s “fortress mentality” reproduces “representations of ‘Germans’ and ‘Jews’ as two absolutely distinct abstract principles that have been locked in an eternal struggle whose outcome can only be total victory or total defeat—*Sieg oder Untergang*.”⁴⁵ Paradoxically, then, it is precisely because of entertainment’s desensitizing impact that “Goldhagen’s images of horror remained sufficiently distant to prevent alienation through anxiety and disgust.” Among German readers, however, the prospect for sadomasochistic identification with these abstractions may coincide with an “almost perverse pride” in their shameful history, what Heinrich August Winkler alluded to as “negative nationalism.”⁴⁶

To obtain a clearer sense of how traumatic history might be written in the absence of resentment, it is illuminating to compare Goldhagen’s depiction of the Bialystok synagogue burning with Browning’s narration of the same incident:

What started as a pogrom quickly escalated into more systematic mass murder. Jews collected at the marketplace were taken to a park, lined up against a wall, and shot. The killing lasted until dark. At the synagogue, where at least 700 Jews had been collected, gasoline was poured at the entryways. A grenade was tossed into

the building, igniting a fire. Police shot anyone trying to escape. The fire spread to nearby houses in which Jews were hiding, and they too were burned alive. The next day, thirty wagonloads of corpses were taken to a mass grave. An estimated 2,000 to 2,200 Jews had been killed. When General Pflugbeil sent a messenger to Major Weis to inquire about the fire, the major was found drunk. He claimed to know nothing about what was happening. Weis and his officers subsequently submitted a false report of the events to Pflugbeil.⁴⁷

In contrast to Goldhagen's description, Browning's prose is self-effacing and its use of adjectives and other intensifiers sparing. This is not to suggest that Browning's description lacks a coherent narrative structure or dramatic tension: the staccato sequence of matter-of-fact sentences builds a unifying parallelism into a description of the actions, causes, and effects with a clearly linked beginning, middle, and end; however, the deadpan irony elicited by the concluding fragment of indirect conversation seems geared to provoke tempered disgust and reflective judgment rather than incite moral outrage. In short, Browning has maintained a civil, detached tone that neither calls attention to itself nor offers much in the way of affective content. The problem with this style is that it incongruously applies to the barbaric actions of the reservists themselves. Do these "ordinary men" really deserve the courtesy that Browning extends to them by mitigating their agency through his recourse to the passive voice?

While I object to this aspect of his narrative style, I generally appreciate Browning's account for its nuanced and evenhanded consideration of the disavowals, ambivalences, overcompensations, coldness, and unabashed savagery that inflected the police reservists' metamorphosis into mass murderers. Goldhagen, for his part, is justified in eschewing the passive voice in order to emphasize their agency. He is also right to insist upon the moral and practical meaning of German cruelty toward the Jews during killing operations and on the death marches as an index of the unique virility of German anti-Semitism at that time. For Goldhagen, if the state-authorized orders are of secondary significance in understanding the motivations of the perpetrators, it is because these orders are not sufficient to explain the thoroughness and enjoyment with which soldiers and reservists rounded up their victims young and old, forced them to strip in the woods, and shot them in mass graves dug at gunpoint by the Jews themselves. In the same vein, the deeply ingrained will to obey authority cannot fully clarify the behavior of male and female guards who continued to starve and beat their Jewish prisoners to death on pointless marches at the end of the war even after Himmler ordered an end to the killings.

Goldhagen's exposure of the Germans' enjoyment of a brutal process whose explicit aim was extermination may provide something of a corrective

to the work of scholars in recent years who have gone too far in separating themselves from “intentionalist” understandings of the Holocaust. In Eley’s definition, intentionalists “personalized the explanation of the ‘Final Solution’ around Hitler’s ideological outlook and dictatorial will.”⁴⁸ In contrast, so-called functionalist or structuralist readings shift attention from a demonic Hitler and his high command to focus instead on the institutional and economic structures and contingencies that propelled participation in the genocide, particularly at the bureaucratic level. In this manner, historians have sought to qualify what they correctly see as an overemphasis on the central role of Hitler and his inner circle in orchestrating the atrocities and in manipulating and enforcing mass obedience. Conversely, the functionalist approach has sometimes been marred by a socially deterministic view of the perpetrators’ actions. In Moishe Postone’s view, functionalist approaches “take for granted what needs to be explained—that a program of complete extermination could even become thinkable.”⁴⁹

Dominick LaCapra acknowledges that “the stress on industrialized mass murder, the machinery of destruction, technology, (pseudo-)science and bureaucracy (as well as peer pressure and careerism) do not fully account for the forces Goldhagen obsessively and graphically depicts and imaginatively projects or enhances.”⁵⁰ Against this backdrop, Goldhagen’s Manichaean outlook had the peculiar merit of reminding historians and other scholars that the killers were either anti-Semitic or acquiesced in anti-Semitic convictions when they followed orders to murder. Brennan observes that “Goldhagen’s thesis involves an explicit rejection of accounts” exemplified by Raul Hilberg’s that “explain the Holocaust as involving emotionless and bureaucratic ‘production-line killing’ or as the inner potentiality of modernity to reverse gains made during the Enlightenment,” à la Zygmunt Bauman. Goldhagen, Brennan says, also repudiates accounts that focus on Hitler’s charisma and the cult of personality, sociologicistic standpoints that emphasize the Germans’ deeply ingrained will to obey authority or resist collectively applied and state-ordained peer pressure as explanations for a “temporary suspension of ‘civilized’ behavior under totalitarian conditions, in which all opposition was effectively (and decisively) crushed.”⁵¹ By maniacally reciting the nationality of the perpetrators, Goldhagen, as Bartov characterizes it, “led a frontal attack against all of those scholars who had apparently become wholly incapable of seeing what the general public had intuitively known all along, that it was ‘the Germans’ who had done it, that they had always wanted to do it, that they did it because they hated Jews, and that once called upon to do it, they did it with great enthusiasm and much pleasure.”⁵² In short, Goldhagen’s “unrestrained moralism enabled the reader to cut through complexity and hold the perpetrators accountable in an emotionally satisfying fashion.”⁵³

It was the fog engulfing questions about individual and collective motivation that Goldhagen strove to pierce.⁵⁴ According to Jäckel, Goldhagen

“wants to avoid the ‘clinical’ perspective which restricts itself to numbers and place-names” and chooses instead “to convey the horrors of these atrocities which others have neglected.”⁵⁵ Jäckel grants that Goldhagen is justified in doing so and also acknowledges that Goldhagen’s graphic treatment of the atrocities committed by police battalions and by the guards during the death marches (the principal part of the book, in other words) succeeds in providing “some penetrating passages.” However, his responsibilities as a historian do not end there: “The main task of research is, after all, to explain the connections. Goldhagen has neglected to make these connections; the Police Battalions’ place and participation [in these events consequently] remain unclear.”⁵⁶ The book is, moreover, “riddled with errors”⁵⁷ and Jäckel unhesitatingly condemns it as “little more than a step backward to positions long since passed by; even worse,” Jäckel continues, “it is a relapse to the most primitive of all stereotypes.”⁵⁸ In short, as Jäckel bluntly asserts at the outset of his review, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* “is not on the cutting edge of research and does not satisfy even mediocre standards; it is simply bad.”⁵⁹

The stridency of Jäckel’s condemnation gives me reason to pause. Goldhagen’s ride on a megalomaniac “wave of hyperbole” is not a sufficient reason to dismiss the book as a whole.⁶⁰ Nor is the fact that he contributed to a sensational marketing campaign on the book’s behalf that commercializes the seemingly inexhaustible potential for the Jewish genocide to instigate controversy—to capitalize, in Littell’s words, on the “brute fact that today ‘there’s no business like Shoah business.’”⁶¹ It is important to recall that Goldhagen’s book found an extraordinarily receptive audience among the mainstream media and nonacademic readers. By the end of the first year of its publication in English, it had been translated into twelve languages. Not only was Goldhagen’s the first scholarly examination of the Shoah to become an international best seller, it was also the first “asserting a long genealogy of German evil” since the veteran U.S. foreign correspondent William L. Shirer’s *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1961) to have achieved this degree of commercial success.⁶² Grossmann reports: “Eighty thousand copies of the German edition were sold in the first month, and by the time of the book tour, 3000 books a day were flying off the shelf.”⁶³ As Goldhagen packed expansive “venerable” high-culture venues in Hamburg, Berlin, Frankfurt, and Munich, Grossmann writes, “people of mixed generations fought for tickets to the panel discussions as if they were headed to a rock concert.”⁶⁴

Such success is particularly remarkable when one considers with Caplan that academic books in the United States “never break through into this kind of mass market.”⁶⁵ Goldhagen was even awarded the Democracy Prize by the journal *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* at a ceremony in Bonn on March 10, 1997, where the head of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, Jan Philipp Reemstma, a leading philanthropist of the Left, conferred the prize, and no less illustrious a figure than Jürgen Habermas gave the *Laudatio* before an audience of two thousand.⁶⁶

Grossmann observes that Habermas's *Laudatio* is "full of qualifiers and defense mechanisms."⁶⁷ It commences with the grounds for bestowing this prize on Goldhagen, who, "through the 'urgency, the forcefulness, and the moral strength of his presentation,'" has "'provided a powerful stimulus to the public conscience of the Federal Republic'" and "sharpened 'our sensibility for what constitutes the background and the limit of a German normalization.'"⁶⁸ Hence the prize reflects "the contributions that an American, a Jewish historian, has made toward Germans' search for the *proper way to come to terms with a criminal period of their history*" (my emphasis).⁶⁹ Habermas deflects the widespread criticisms of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* by celebrating the book's pedagogical effects and disclaiming his right to assume the authority of a professional historian in adjudicating its merit as a historical work. In this way, Eley asserts, "the impact of Goldhagen's book was co-opted into the political pedagogy Habermas, Reemtsma, and other left intellectuals had been practicing in their various ways since earlier in the 1980s."⁷⁰ Despite his qualifications, Habermas's ceremonial role did not shore up his credentials with leftist scholars, who share the historians' negative judgment of Goldhagen's book and therefore viewed the former's praise as yet another example of his "anachronistic anti-fascism."⁷¹

Habermas goes on to contest the criticism that "Goldhagen's intentionalist argument overextends the credit of his empirical work,"⁷² an allegation that for Eaglestone enjoins us to grant that "there is something to overextend." "It is only because the work claims to be historical," Eaglestone writes, "that its moral elements—the 'urgency, the forcefulness, and the moral strength of his presentation'—are deemed important."⁷³ Eaglestone advocates for Goldhagen's admission into the bastion of "reasonable" historians on the grounds that his method—at once "cultural cognitive" and explicitly moral—is based on his view of human nature, an ethics and worldview that shapes his choices without undermining the historical status of his statements. In keeping with a postmodernist stance modeled by White and Jean-François Lyotard, Eaglestone stipulates that "being a 'reasonable historian' and producing history means following the rules of the genre" of historical writing as a sophisticated narrative about the past. The conventions of this narrative prioritize certain modes for weighing evidence and, as Eaglestone notes, these rules "can be followed more or less well."⁷⁴ If Goldhagen's book was important, Eaglestone argues, it was because it followed the rules and was therefore regarded as a history, albeit flawed.

The predominant tendency in the historians' reception of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* contradicts Eaglestone's assessment. The impact of the book is significant precisely because it was deemed *unreasonable*: in the minds of his peers, he did not follow the professional historian's rules consistently or sufficiently and, as Eley puts it, "he dismissed the normal requirements of evidence."⁷⁵ Birn, the chief historian in the War Crimes Against Humanity Section of the Canadian Justice Department and former adviser to the

U.S. Office of Special Investigations, insisted “that by using Goldhagen’s method of handling the evidence, one could easily find sufficient citations from the material he used to demonstrate the exact opposite of what Goldhagen maintains.”⁷⁶ Jacob Neusner even goes to the length of lambasting *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* as a “hysterical” and “shoddy” work, full of “such pretension and violent emotion,” “pseudo-scholarship and bad arguments” that it “calls into question the scholarly integrity of Harvard’s doctorate.”⁷⁷ Clearly, in Neusner’s eyes, Goldhagen failed to produce the generic effect of reasonableness that results from adhering to disciplinary protocols—quite the opposite, actually. Such an unequivocal pronouncement underscores how the purview of scientific rigor extends beyond the treatment of evidence to behavior, and not just among professional scholars, but also to such readers who will be influenced by the beatitude of experts modeling judiciousness.

By implying that Goldhagen’s expression of traumatic affect leads him to poor professional conduct, these assessments speak to the antidisciplinary status of his resentment, which, I want to argue, might provoke us to reexamine our commonsense understanding of the codes of acceptable conduct that historians introject and simulate as *signs of reason*. His impropriety invites us to consider professional subjectification as a *generic* operation that codifies expectations about how best to imitate the “reasonable scholar” model. Our imaginary identification with this model induces us to internalize and at least partially obey generic conventions of style as behavior.

In what follows, I will consider the imaginary valence of this identification as the crux of disciplinary mimesis. I borrow the psychoanalytic term *imaginary* from Jacques Lacan to refer to the register wherein memories, fantasies, idealizations, and identifications are created and screened. Foremost among them is the *imago* or *ideal ego* (self-image) as the nucleus of an infantile narcissistic desire. This register shapes and is shaped by the *symbolic* as the realm of language, discourse, norms, and surveillance that are absorbed and introjected in the form of an *ego-ideal*. It is the reciprocal relation between the symbolic and the imaginary that is at work in the disciplining of scholarly identifications and interpretations. The *real* is Lacan’s term for the inassimilable and refractory force of the repressed, which “extimately” resists yet also striates the commerce between the two other registers that foreclose it. One of its signs in discourse and other practices is repetition, since the real is that which always returns to the same place. Of interest here for psychoanalytic theorists and cultural critics is the pattern that emerges in behavior that signals the insistent logic of a fantasy that simultaneously structures and exceeds reality.⁷⁸

LaCapra figures the Goldhagen controversy as the real when he insists that it has received “too much attention” and likens it to a “recurrent dream” with “the tendency not to be laid to rest but to reappear. To the extent that this is the case,” LaCapra adds, “it may indicate that there are aspects of the book and the debate it provoked with which we have

still not come sufficiently to terms.”⁷⁹ From a psychoanalytic standpoint, the particular hurdle that historiography is challenged to confront in the specter of Goldhagen’s traumatic affect is how the return of the “impossible real” troubles the civility of disciplinary identifications “wie ein Stachel im Fleisch” [“Like a Thorn in the Flesh”] as Han-Ulrich Wehler entitled his review of the book.⁸⁰ What is the destiny of Goldhagen’s resentment in the disciplinary imaginary?

Trauma and the Disciplinary Imaginary

I have been leading up to the question of how historiography reinscribes its limits as a mode of professional subject formation by discouraging historians from querying their methods for assessing the imaginative and affective dimensions of representation. This line of inquiry is indebted to Wilhelm Dilthey, when he delimited *Verstehen*, or imaginative understanding, as a mode of investigation specific to history as a human science. One of the aims of this chapter is to extend the “critique of historical reason” that Dilthey inaugurated when he invited historians to consider the question of how “the mental construction of the mind-affected world make[s] knowledge of mind-affected reality possible.”⁸¹ It is the regulative power of this “mental construction of the mind-affected world” that is at stake in my conception of the disciplinary imaginary. Another goal is to conceptualize the affective undercurrents of this praxis as an object of inquiry in their own right.

Historians adopt a crude form of *Verstehen* in the course of imagining events and describing motivations. “Vulgar” (i.e., distorted and reductive) historicist *Verstehen*, as Caplan explains, claims empathetic knowledge of historical actors.⁸² While resentment is widely recognized by historians as a bristling motive of ongoing social and political tensions,⁸³ the theoretical issues that it raises are shuffled off onto other disciplines, or to reiterate Dean’s point above, onto “bad objects” such as Goldhagen. The affective residues of the past, it seems, comprise an “improper” object of historical explanation, because they fall between the demands for a logical and verifiable examination of archival evidence. The methods for investigating such detritus are the slippery territory of other more theoretical disciplines (such as cultural studies and psychology), which many historians view with suspicion (there are certain disciplines that are more “proper” than others, after all).

LaCapra is one significant exception to this generalization. The historical status of traumatic affect is an explicit departure point for his adaptation of psychoanalytic terms to create a critical framework for studies of traumatic history.⁸⁴ In a recent book, *History in Transit*, LaCapra asks, To what extent one can determine “what precisely in the work of a historian can be related to his or her own experience?”⁸⁵ It is apparent to LaCapra that Goldhagen’s mode of *Verstehen* in *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* is not

critically nuanced by such a question. Goldhagen recognizes the “alterity” of the perpetrators’ perspective but projects their actions through the eyes of certain (Jewish) victims “with whom Goldhagen identifies” and whose experience of the events he “phantasmatically recounts.”⁸⁶ Hence, while the book is “ostensibly a contribution to perpetrator history, the basis of its argument is an excessive, unchecked identification” with Jewish victims and an imaginative introjection of their reactions.⁸⁷

LaCapra’s observations resonate with Hammermann’s and Bartov’s suspicions, cited earlier, that elements of fantasy are imbricated in Goldhagen’s graphic visualizations of events. From LaCapra’s perspective, Goldhagen’s resentful tone and phantasmatic style might be read as a form of *acting out* whereby his subject position as a survivor’s son becomes something of a “total identity.” Possessed by his father’s past, he cannot control his compulsion to repeat it as though it were fully present.⁸⁸ This is clear from the bitterness that appears to overwhelm his ability to make balanced judgments about his own evidence. Conversely, while Jäckel scrutinizes the validity of Goldhagen’s individual claims, he avoids the painful truth behind this “simply bad” best-selling book—that Germany’s democratic recuperation cannot heal wounds left by ostracism, dispossession, deportation, enslavement, torture, and genocide.

LaCapra suggests that scholarship focusing on recent extremely traumatic events is more likely to evince heightened “transferential” identifications with the object of inquiry as researchers alternately deny, act out, and work through its effects. He notes that this “transferential problem revealed itself as particularly intense” in the case of Goldhagen’s book and its reception.⁸⁹ My own analysis of the Goldhagen controversy is indebted to LaCapra’s adaptation of the psychoanalytic concept of transference to describe the ways in which the varying subject positions of historians and other scholars differentially reflect the traumatic impact of their object of inquiry. Notably, for LaCapra, transference is no longer limited to the clinical context with the analyst playing the omniscient surface for the projection of various oedipal scenes. Transference is also a disciplinary phenomenon whereby “the historian or analyst tends to repeat with more or less significant variations the problems active in the object of study.”⁹⁰ Above and beyond many other events, “the Holocaust presents the historian with transference in the most traumatic form conceivable—but in a form that will vary with the difference in subject-position of the analyst.”⁹¹ For this reason, while certain statements “or even entire orientations may seem appropriate for someone in a given subject-position,” they will not seem appropriate for everyone:

Whether the historian or analyst is a survivor, a relative of survivors, a former Nazi, a former collaborator, a relative of former Nazis or collaborators, a younger Jew or German distanced from more immediate contact with survival, participation, or collaboration, or a

relative “outsider” to these problems will make a difference even in the meaning of statements that may be formally identical. . . . Thus, while any historian must be “invested” in a distinctive way in the events of the Holocaust, not all investments (or cathexes) are the same, and not all statements, rhetorics, or orientations are equally available to different historians.⁹²

It is in light of such incommensurable investments that LaCapra views the Holocaust as a *limit case* with respect to the work of critical historicization. For if the injustice of genocide cannot be repaired, then historians will inevitably confront, defer, or deny this limit in the course of their analyses. In any case, “the point is not to deny transference or simply to act it out, but to attempt to work through it in a critical manner.”⁹³

LaCapra’s understanding of working through evolves from Freud’s *durcharbeiten* as the self-conscious processing of disavowed, repressed, or denied aspects of the past.⁹⁴ However, LaCapra insists on giving working through a critical dimension that distinguishes it from the ideological project of “mastering the past” (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). In this formulation, working through counteracts compulsive acting out through an explicit and critically controlled process of repetition. This process has the power to alter life in significant ways by enabling “the selective retrieval and modified enactment of unactualized past possibilities” and “a more viable articulation of affect and cognition or representation, as well as ethical and sociopolitical agency, in the present and future.”⁹⁵

LaCapra’s remarks bear on the ways in which standards of moral propriety decide not only *what* may be said about recent traumatic history, but also *how* and *by whom*, which is why, in the case of the Holocaust, historians’ national, religious, and ideological backgrounds become an issue. Obviously, the well-established German historian Mommsen will relate to this limit differently than the Jewish-American Goldhagen, who is also a relative newcomer to the historical field. In the same vein, American historians do not share the same motivations for debunking Goldhagen’s argument that German historians do. It is impossible to view Browning’s critical issues with Goldhagen in the same way as Mommsen’s. In contrast to his older German colleague, Browning, an American, does not feel a need to vindicate Germany by invoking its successful reintegration into the West. Reciprocally, the perspective of descendants of murdered or surviving Jews will typically differ from the views of Jews without a direct connection to the genocide, as will the sensibilities of German historians of different generations and political leanings, not to mention of different Germanys before 1990.⁹⁶

However, this is not to suggest that such investments and perspectives are fixed within any generation or even any particular group. In extending the theoretical implications of LaCapra’s polemical points, I would like to

emphasize that scholars' subject positions are intimately bound up with collective memories that change not only between generations, but also within the scope of an individual's lifetime. Maurice Halbwachs has observed that personal memory has a collective dimension insofar as an individual's sense of the past at any given moment is determined and inflected by his or her differential membership in multiple groups that are themselves in flux.⁹⁷ One might therefore speak of memory's "fragility" as a quality of the variable influences of different contexts that are as provisional and finite as the communities who define them.

The various interpretations of the past precipitated by a scholar's transference with his or her object of inquiry will reflect the repressions, exclusions, and fixations peculiar to the collective memories of the communities to which he or she belongs. Another way of saying this is that meaning, like memory, is a function of the alterity or dehiscence of socially mediated investments in the object at stake.⁹⁸ As collectivities change and/or disperse, so too does the quality and degree of a historian's commitments to the concerns of those communities with which he or she is affiliated. To observe that collective memory is a practice as much as it is a product of interpretation, reconfiguration, and displacement is, thus, to emphasize its historicity as a socially contingent force.

The reciprocity between interpretation and collective memory has an important bearing on the problem of theorizing the disciplinary imaginary. This is the case insofar as the ideal of disciplinary propriety draws its normative power from the institutionalization of moral, aesthetic, and/or scientific standards. Disciplinary traditions are institutionalized collective memories that establish a horizon of interpretation by positing models that are worth imitating and questions that are valid to pose. If teachers or mentors do not render this phenomenon explicit, students and aspiring scholars will passively inherit tradition as an unacknowledged limit that naturalizes the power of particular interpretations and standards of judgment and thus circumscribes the individual's freedom to adopt or contest various ideas without being beholden to it. The task of becoming conscious about a discipline's horizon is thus a social as well as a hermeneutical problem.

In *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*, LaCapra problematizes institutionalized structures of interpretation, but he is more interested in deducing the symptomatic configuration of texts from their "ideologically reinforcing" elements.⁹⁹ He therefore rejects a teleological historicist temporality, because its rigid reliance on contextualization disables it from accounting for anachronisms or ideological symptoms in texts and other artifacts. In its place, LaCapra adopts a psychoanalytically attenuated Nietzschean temporality to read ideological symptoms as the "return of the repressed."¹⁰⁰ The result is a concept of *repetitive temporality*, or what he calls "history as displacement," that draws on the *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness) of historical understanding. For LaCapra, the belatedness of historical

understanding enables us to see things or to ask questions that “were not available to oneself or others in the past.” In this respect, belatedness is “bound up both with traumatic effects and with the very ability to learn from an exchange with the past.”¹⁰¹

LaCapra’s attention to the retroactive temporalities at stake in instances of traumatic history is valuable for emphasizing the way in which trauma operates as a kind of *affective horizon* for Holocaust historiography. In his words, the conceptualization of time as repetition with change “allows for a recognition of the need to act out problems ‘symptomatically’ in a post-traumatic context and for the significance of trauma in history which may be particularly marked in the recent past.” By the same token, it “allows for the way in which trauma limits history and historical understanding, notably in its disruption of contextualization and dialogic exchange.”¹⁰² In this manner, LaCapra calls attention to the connection between trauma, ethics, and ideology in scholarly interpretations of the Holocaust. Incommensurable subject positions will effect incommensurable meanings whose moral propriety and substantive value will need to be judged on a case-by-case basis. Historians and critics must therefore consider their relative implication in the object and its context without losing sight of the way in which the object “answers back”: texts should not become mere pretexts for “one’s own undoings and unfashionings,” as LaCapra warns.¹⁰³ For LaCapra, the ability to work-through traumatic history ultimately depends on this hermeneutical self-discipline.

LaCapra distinguishes individual motivation and intention from ideology as a general framework of meaning, which, as Postone points out, “is important when psychoanalytic categories are used to illuminate social and historical phenomena”;¹⁰⁴ however, this distinction does not account for the ways in which not all meanings are altogether intended or how they become unconsciously ideological, hence symptomatic. Intention and ideology are difficult to distinguish from each other because even critical scholars presuppose a certain level of “common sense” as an intuitively self-evident set of truths. Yet it is precisely the subterranean disposition of this intuition that perpetuates the positivistic assumption that a nonideological standpoint is possible. It may be that the psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious renders the distinction between intention and ideology moot. This standpoint presumes that the unconscious places subjects under the spell of individual and inherited fantasies that generate a nexus of imaginary and symbolic identifications; meaning is therefore unconsciously bound up with ideological horizons of interpretation. The concept of the unconscious therefore suggests that the field of actions and desires is only intentional to the extent that individuals “choose” to activate a largely inherited cultural repertoire of images as well as the laws, familial structures, idioms, and social conventions that precede and frame consciousness and inclination. In what follows, I will make a preliminary attempt to theorize how scientific and moral intuitions are mediated by imaginary and sociohistorical identifications,