

Review Article

Holocaust Iconoclasm and the Anti-Intellectual: "Jetztzeit" as a Response to the Postmodern Impasse

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That's the difficulty in these times, ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to meet the horrible truth and be shattered. It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart.

I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death, I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the suffering of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquillity will return again. (Frank 694)

ANNE FRANK, WHOSE famous *Diary* was first published in English in 1952, wrote the above entry in 1941, when she was fifteen years old. Her *Diary*, translated into numerous languages and adapted for the stage and screen, has become a central artifact in the popular imagination of the Holocaust. Recently, a diary of a very different nature has come to light: the first volume of Victor Klemperer's *I Will Bear Witness* was published in English translation in 1998; the second volume was published just this spring. Klemperer was, until his dismissal in

1935, a professor and chair of Romance languages and literature at Dresden Technical University in Germany. When the diary entries begin in 1933, he is 51 years of age. Married to Eva Klemperer, a Protestant, since 1906, Victor Klemperer has himself been a convert to Protestantism for at least twenty years. He is a veteran of the First World War. He has been on the faculty at Dresden Technical University for 13 years, and has published numerous books and articles.

I mention these facts to suggest the profound differences between these two authors, and their two diaries. Although Klemperer's book has been the subject of a 13-part television series in Germany, I doubt that it will inspire a Broadway play or Hollywood movie. Klemperer's diary entries do not offer up the readily consumable, easily narrativized, black-and-white sentimentality of the teen-aged naïf, Anne Frank, who, because she is in hiding throughout her ordeal, has little contact with the outside world. Klemperer, by contrast, due to his status as a World War I veteran and his marriage to an Aryan, manages to avoid deportation to the concentration camps until, in February 1945, he is among the last 198 of the 1,265 registered Jews in Dresden. Although he suffers increasing privations and indignities during the Nazi years, he is nonetheless able to provide an account of the Holocaust from within the Third Reich. In contrast to the majority of diaries written during this period, including Anne Frank's and even Klemperer's own, earlier volume of memoirs published in 1989, Klemperer appears to write these entries without any sense of their eventual publication, and without any retroactive narrativization or self-justification. As a result, the diaries give us a day-by-day sense of the Nazi party's growing strength and influence among ordinary Germans, and of the subtle ways that such power is consolidated on a micro-level.

The diaries are especially important in that they manage to escape both iconoclasm and kitsch. Instead, by recording day-by-day banalities, they teach us something about our own postmodern impasse, which, I suggest, is caught between, on the one hand, a feeling of incommensurability (between people, between groups, between language games, between the

present and the past) and, on the other hand, a proliferation of mass-market simulacra. Klemperer's diaries respond at once to the intellectuals of the postmodern condition and to the anti-intellectualism of the masses, thus providing a lesson in the ethics of being a scholar, particularly a scholar of literature and culture.

The interest of such an account can perhaps best be described by another German-Jewish intellectual who, in despair, ended up committing suicide in 1940 on the Franco-Spanish border just weeks, or even days, before he might have escaped Vichy France. As Walter Benjamin writes, to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was," but rather, "to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (681), with all the complexly contending forces that make the future so uncertain in any given moment of time. Benjamin terms this moment of danger "Jetztzeit," literally, "the time of the now." Each entry in Klemperer's diary conveys the everyday effects of just such a moment of danger. For example, here is the entry for September 11, 1938:

Mood of the public, of the workers in particular, is bad. If I talk to the butcher or the butter man here in Dresden, then there will be peace, but if (as the day before yesterday) I listen to Wolf, the car man, then so many of his mates have been fetched straight from work to the army again: "Things are coming to a head now!" If I read the newspaper, see and hear the film reports, then we're doing soooo well, we love the Führer soo much and sooo unanimously — what is real, what is happening? That's how one experiences history. We know even less about today than about yesterday and no more than about tomorrow. (268)

What one learns from Klemperer's diary entries is precisely what is left *out* of the history books. The diary describes what Hannah Arendt, in her book on the Eichmann trials, terms the "banality of evil" — the day-by-day inhumanities of the Nazi regime and the oh-so-gradual radicalization of the prohibitions against the Jews, as well as the increasing acquiescence and fear of the German people. As Klemperer remarks, "the changing details of everyday life are precisely what is most important" (364); thus, "of the National Socialists' criminal and insane acts I only make a note of what somehow touches me personally.

Everything else can be looked up in the newspapers" (17). On August 17, 1937, for example, he writes:

In the *Stürmer* (which is displayed at every corner) I recently saw a picture: two girls in swimming costumes at a seaside resort. Above it: "Prohibited for Jews," underneath it: "How nice that it's just us now!" Then I remembered a long forgotten incident. September 1900 or 1901 in Landsberg. In the lower sixth we were 4 Jews among 16, in the upper sixth 3 among 8 pupils. There was little trace of anti-Semitism among either the teachers or the pupils. More precisely none at all . . . I knew only that a Jew could become neither a fraternity member as a student nor an officer. [. . .] So on the Day of Atonement — Yom Kippur — the Jews did not attend classes. The next day our comrades told us, laughing and without the least malice (just as the words themselves were also only uttered jokingly by the altogether humane teacher), Kufahl, the mathematician, had said to the reduced class: "Today it's *just us*." In my memory these words took on a quite horrible significance: to me it confirms the claim of the NSDAP to express the true opinion of the German people. And I believe ever more strongly that Hitler really does embody the soul of the German people, that he really stands for "Germany" and that he will consequently maintain himself and justifiably maintain himself. Whereby I have not only outwardly lost my Fatherland. And even if the government should change one day: my inner sense of belonging is gone. . . .

I hear from Marta [Klemperer's sister] . . . that Georg [his brother] is in Switzerland. He does not treat me with much affection. I believe he gives me all the money because 25 years ago he promised Father to help me. I believe that he is guided neither by fraternal love nor by any kind of respect for my work, convinced that I am not congenial to him and am to some extent contemptible. . . . But I have become a little thick-skinned and cynical as things stand, I have much more use for cash support than for fraternal respect and love. As I have already often observed, there is very little feeling for people left in me. Eva — and then comes Mujel, the tomcat. (233-34)

Klemperer considers the events of his everyday life with the cynicism of an adult intellectual. We are a long way from Anne Frank's plaintive remark "I still believe that people are really good at heart."

This is not to say that Klemperer neglects to record many acts of kindness and bravery. Indeed, his diary is compelling in that it presents us not with statistics — 6 million Jews killed, a German population of 90 million — but with descriptions of

individuals, both brave opponents of the regime, and collaborators. Estreicher, for example, is a Jew who takes bribes:

“People have already been begging me on their knees here and offering me two and three hundred marks and I throw them out and you, for whom I do so much, are ungrateful!” Then his injured vanity showed itself: “The mayor of Dölschen was right in his judgment of you on the telephone — he did not know that I am a Jew. You want to be the great man, you are the famous scholar, and I am only little Estreicher! — But I am an official . . .” Ultimately I did not want to continue the quarrel. . . . The man is worse than any real Nazi. (333-334)

Then there are those in power, for example, Constable Radke:

A little while ago Constable Radke was here from the local council, I should come up to the council office because of the identity card. We had a friendly conversation, the man shook my hand, told me to keep my spirits up. We know from before that he is certainly no Nazi, that his sister is in difficulties, because her husband, a gardener, has a grandmother who is not Aryan. But then the next day, when I was up there, he happened to come through the room; he stared ahead as he went past, as much a stranger as possible. In his behavior the man probably represents 79 million Germans, perhaps half a million more than that rather than less. (283)

Even more fascinating are the numbers of ordinary Germans that pass through these pages:

Whom do I see, to whom do I listen? Natscheff, Berger, the grocer; the cigar dealer in Chemnitzer Strasse, who is a freemason, the charwoman, whose forty-year-old son is stationed in the West and who is on leave just now, the coal heavers. Vox populi disintegrates into voces populi. [. . .] — I often ask myself where all the wild anti-Semitism is. For my part I encounter much sympathy, people help me out, but fearfully of course. The women in the fishmonger’s, Vogel, Berger, Frau Haeselbarth. [. . .] Yesterday I met Moses, the greengrocer, up in the village; he only rarely comes by now — lack of goods. “If you’re not ashamed to carry a sack?” I was not ashamed and was given an unfrozen cabbage, a rutabaga and carrots — all rare delicacies. In addition a present of a bread coupon. Moses has repeatedly given Eva potatoes. It is well known that we are allocated fewer coupons than “comrades of the people.” (329-330)

By providing such details, *I Will Bear Witness* teaches us that there is an alternative to the two modes or strategies of representing Holocaust experience which are most current today.

The first strategy results from the belief that the Holocaust is indeed unrepresentable, because representation can only detract from the reality of the horror. Claude Lanzmann, the director of the much-acclaimed *Shoah*, provides a perfect example of this attitude in his critique of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*: the Holocaust, Lanzmann says, is

unique in that it erects a ring of fire around itself, a borderline that cannot be crossed because there is a certain ultimate degree of horror that cannot be transmitted. To claim it is possible to do so is to be guilty of the most serious transgression. I deeply believe there are some things that cannot and should not be represented. (14)²

Lanzmann goes so far as to extend his injunction against representation to historical documentation itself: "If I had stumbled on a real SS film — a secret film, because filming was strictly forbidden—that showed how 3,000 Jewish men, women and children were gassed in Auschwitz's crematorium 2, not only would I not have shown it but I would have destroyed it" (14). I term this first strategy "Holocaust iconoclasm." It amounts to a commandment — "Thou shalt not represent me directly" — and thus threatens to theologize the potent and still potential violence of the horror as an inhuman, almost divine manifestation.

"Holocaust iconoclasm" finds its mirror image in the mode that I describe as "Nazi kitsch." This second strategy attests to the fact that, despite the sense of ineffability surrounding Nazi atrocities, we still feel the need to represent this trauma in our political unconscious. The sheer number of films about the era, which pop up like so many returns of the repressed, seem to testify to this need, from *Cabaret* to *The Diary of Anne Frank*, from *Indiana Jones* to *Schindler's List*.³ Even in these films, however — and here we may begin to see how these two strategies are in fact closely linked — the Holocaust itself, which certainly grounds our sense of the era's "evil," remains always at the margins, beyond or at the limits of representation, as the supernatural essence of evil.⁴

So, on the one hand, a theologization of the Holocaust — think of the very word, "Holocaust," chosen to describe it; on the other, the demonization of Nazi Germany through Hollywood stereotypes. Does the iconoclasm of the first strategy serve

only to hide the fear — instilled to some extent by Nazi kitsch — that there is nothing behind any representation of the terror but other representations, and do not both these strategies therefore play into the very hands of those who would deny that the Holocaust ever happened? Have the endless cultural representations of the Nazi period — which have proliferated and become such a part of our imagination that we can have Storm Troopers in *Star Wars* — become a substitute for the pure and intelligible Idea of Terror, just as, for the Puritan Iconoclasts, “the visible machinery of icons... substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God” (Baudrillard 8)? The problem with Holocaust iconoclasm is that it accompanies, as Anton Kaes suggests, an apocalyptic and postmodern sense of “post-histoire” where representation fails before the rupture of the past. We are left, Kaes argues, with only “elegaic memories of past glories, nostalgia, and a sense of waiting for apocalypse” (219).⁵ Since truth or history can no longer be figured directly, we can only defer justice eschatologically, to an apocalypse beyond representation. The side-effect is that we collapse our responsible connection with past crimes onto an eternal present of equally invalid intertexts and interpretations that fail before the apocalyptic sublime of an ineffable horror. The connection to the second strategy — Nazi kitsch — is clear. Might we not in fact call this second strategy the symptom of the refusal to work through traumatic experience? We thus absolve ourselves of responsibility and obviate the need to deal with our guilt by projecting our anxiety for past horrors or our fear of the potential for horror in our own system onto another object, a Holocaust memorial, for example, or a Hollywood image of Nazism — the aesthetic detachment of the monument, on the one hand, the pleasures of narrative on the other.

According to Jean Baudrillard, the religious “iconolaters” who allowed God to appear “in the mirror of images” in fact “already enacted his death and his disappearance in the epiphany of his representations” and accepted the fact that “Behind the baroque of images [only] hides the grey eminence of politics” (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 9-10). Perhaps the same may be said about this baroque of Nazi pastiche, for, as in

Baudrillard's examination of Watergate, this scandal of scandals acts "as a means to regenerate a moral and political principle"; this imaginary acts "as a means to regenerate a reality principle in distress" (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 27). We need a fantasy-image of Nazism against which we can positively define our own identity and from which we can differentiate our uncannily similar form of technological capitalism. We must convince ourselves that a moral and political principle can still exist after a regime that could in effect construct reality upon simulacra, through a Chamber of Culture that could recreate German identity in terms of nostalgic kitsch and the constant regeneration of the perception of crisis. In this way, Nazism was able to counter, while at the same time accounting for, its own technological capitalism through a logic of negativity. The concentration camps became the unreal horror/fantasy against which the rest of German society was able to define its sense of reality. In Nazism we have an example of the power and legitimation inherent in "proving the real by the imaginary, proving truth by scandal, proving the law by transgression. . . . proving the system by crisis and capital by revolution" (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 36).⁶ The point to be made is that we too need our Hollywood stereotypes as well as our Holocaust memorials in order to hide the fact that our own society is, perhaps, not founded on any inherent moral and political truths but rather on the same logic of late capitalism that engendered Nazism.

Klemperer's diary proleptically responds to the two predominant ways of dealing with Holocaust experience in postmodern culture. On the one hand, he describes the period in all its minutiae, thus giving us a sense not of its inexpressibility but rather of its very real, perhaps also still threatening possibility. On the other hand, he refuses to demonize the German people. In this way, the book is quite distinct from Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's much-discussed work, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. Like Goldhagen, Klemperer does make it clear that the German people were responsible for making the system work. As early as August 19, 1933, Klemperer is writing that "No letter, no telephone conversation, no word on the street is safe anymore. Everyone fears the

next person may be an informer" (31). Robert Gellately, in *The Gestapo and German Society*, has proven that Gestapo agents generated as little as 15% of the information that the secret police received about Jews living in Nazi Germany. A majority of the information (at least 57%) came from civilian denunciations. The fact that such civilian denunciations were not forthcoming in, for example, Denmark, Italy or Bulgaria, is precisely what prevented the race laws from being implemented with as much success in those countries. Unlike Goldhagen, however, Klemperer shows that the Nazi system persisted not because of the rabid anti-Semitism of the majority of Germans, but as the result of a sequence of mundane, banal acts — the gradually increased violence of a few, the greed of many, the acquiescence and fear of the majority. What is so valuable about this first volume of Klemperer's diaries, including as they do the years 1933 to 1941, is that they demonstrate the gradual "making-banal" of extremism. In this way, they illustrate the need still to remember today the events of this period.

Allow me to share a personal anecdote: When I taught a class on "Nazisms and Nationalisms" at the University of California, Santa Barbara a number of years ago, one of the exercises I had my students conduct was to put Adolf Eichmann on trial again. Eichmann was a bureaucrat in Nazi Germany, whose job it was to coordinate the daunting transportation project of moving eleven million Jews, homosexuals, Gypsies, and others from across Europe to the various concentration camps in and around Germany. He signed papers, followed orders, and was very good at his job. As he said repeatedly during his interrogation, "A subordinate doesn't interpret an order any more . . . than his superior officer justifies it. The commander has to take the responsibility. That's why the commander has the higher rank" (von Lang 272). When I first set up the parameters of the trial, I worried about asking students to defend a Nazi responsible for making possible the destruction of so many people. The experience, however, turned out to be an eye-opener. I taught the course four times, ran the exercise four times, and every time found that students were more than willing to see Eichmann's side, that the prosecution councils had all sorts of

problems coming up with convincing arguments, that students concurred with Eichmann's self-justification. Out of four trials, Eichmann got off three times. This anecdote is not meant to suggest that another Holocaust is imminent; it is meant to suggest that contemporary societies are not immune to the banalization of evil. As Stanley Milgram writes in the Postscript to the famous psychological experiment in which he tested the willingness of American men, ages 20 to 50, to inflict dangerous levels of shock to victims, the results were "disturbing":

They raise the possibility that human nature, or — more specifically — the kind of character produced in American democratic society, cannot be counted on to insulate its citizens from brutality and inhumane treatment at the direction of malevolent authority. A substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority. (75)

What is most affecting and most inspirational about Victor Klemperer's diaries is that throughout, he refuses to submit to this authority, even as he watches other Jews acquiescing or, worse, collaborating with the local authorities. Klemperer's diary is also inspirational in that it represents an individual's unwillingness to desist from the act that is the first guarantee of individual freedom: expression. I would argue that the very basis of humanity is the expressive act by which one calls upon an other for recognition. You sense this power of the other the moment any person enters a room in which you are alone: you defer, you take the other into account, and act differently as a result. The simple act of saying "hello" to an acquaintance is the daily affirmation of this humanity, and one reason why the enforced Nazi salute in public, "heil Hitler," was so insidious, as if one thereby stated, "I no longer recognize you except through the state." Klemperer recognizes the need to resist crimes against humanity by bearing witness. As he writes on May 27, 1941, after working on his memoirs, entitled *Curriculum Vitae*,

I am working through the diary pages of Vilna '18, reading them first of all. How much I had forgotten, how immensely important are precisely the details of such a time! For the sake of my

Curriculum I must make notes even now, I must, no matter how dangerous it is. That is my professional courage. Certainly I also put other people at risk. But there is nothing else I can do" (386-87).

What is revealing about the gradual Nazi prohibitions against Jews is that, from the beginning, they strike especially hard at this right of the Jews to be heard. Each new prohibition chips away at the human right of recognition by others: The ban on Jews owning cars, on entering parks, on using public libraries, cinemas, or swimming pools; the eventual ghettoization of Jews; the bans on telephones, radios and typewriters; the ban on owning pets (Victor is eventually forced to euthanize his beloved tomcat, Mujel); the yellow star; all lead, finally, to the concentration camps. Throughout, what Klemperer recognizes as the ultimate *sine qua non* of his humanity is his speech and, throughout all the other indignities, he remains determined still to speak — to write his academic book, and then, when he is denied access to libraries and even his own books, to write his memoirs and his diary.

Klemperer's resistance to the Nazi regime is also marked by his refusal to cease asking questions about what is going on around him. This "professional courage," I would argue, indicates Klemperer's significance as an intellectual. We live in a time of anti-intellectualism, when the university professor is increasingly under fire from the general public and the general press. Anti-intellectualism is evident in calls to eliminate tenure and to limit research by liberal arts faculty. It permeates popular culture to the extent that even university students adopt what I describe as a "pose of ignorance." Anti-intellectualism persists, I believe, because it is seen as a sign of common humanity, of a lack of hubris and pretension. But as Klemperer writes, the first goal of tyranny is "the suppression of the urge to ask questions" (254). Perhaps it is not so surprising that the one public show of opposition to Nazism in Klemperer's diaries is caused by a piece of so-called "high" literature, as he explains in the entry for October 6, 1934:

Salzburg Sr. related as absolutely vouched-for an incident at a performance of [Friedrich von Schiller's play] *Don Carlos* in

Hamburg. At Posa's words, "Sire, allow freedom of thought!" there were several minutes of applause. The next day Don Carlos was dropped from every theater, including Dresden. (91)

Victor Klemperer is a professor of literature and, as such, he offers his own defense of higher education and of literary studies in the pages of his diary. To read, to speak, to question, to think critically — these are what it is to be human; these are our last guarantees against oppression and injustice.

NOTES

- 1 Victor Klemperer. *I Will Bear Witness, A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933-1941*. Trans. Martin Chalmers. New York: Random House, 1998. Pp. 519. \$29.95.
- 2 For a strong critique of this position, see Miriam Bratu Hansen's essay, "Schindler's List Is Not Shoah."
- 3 As Lanzmann states of *Schindler's List*, "Spielberg's movie is a kitsch melodrama." He also states that, for Spielberg, "the Holocaust is a backdrop. The blindingly dark sun of the Holocaust is not confronted" (14).
- 4 On the issue of Nazi kitsch, see, in particular, Saul Friedlander's *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*. Also of relevance is Jameson's notion of pastiche in his *Postmodernism*.
- 5 Fredric Jameson concurs at the very beginning of his book *Postmodernism*: "The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the 'crisis' of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.); taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism" (1). See also his examination of the nostalgia film or *la mode rétro*, which he sees as "compatible with addiction" (16-25, 279-96).
- 6 The fact that Baudrillard is speaking of Watergate in this last quotation only underlines the similar logic by which postmodern culture legitimates itself against fantasy-images of the demonic.

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