

The Cantemir Institute, University of Oxford

presents the

Cantemir Lecture, 2012

“Modernist Writing and Modernist Events:
Fictions of Holocaust”

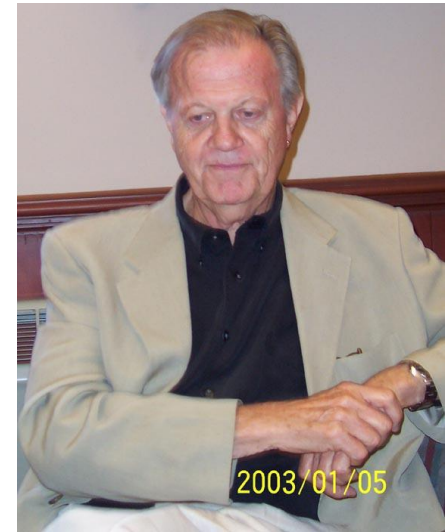
Prof. Hayden White

Introduced by Prof. Chris Wickham

29 February 2012, Examination School

Abstract:

"Traditionally, the relation between history and "belles lettres" was conceived on the analogy of an opposition between fact and fiction. However, with the advent of modernism, the notion of "event" underwent changes such that the possible relations between fact and fiction had to be construed differently. What are the implications, ethical and aesthetic, for discourses seeking to deal with such "extreme" events as the Holocaust, genocide, industrialized death, and manufactured impoverishment of peoples? Can a science of history based upon older notions of fact and fiction deal with such events adequately? What would "adequately" mean in an age in which traditional notions of society and community have been eroded by a suicidal capitalism?"



Short bio:

Hayden White (Ph.D., D.H.L.) is University Professor & Professor of History of Consciousness (Emeritus) at University of California, Santa Cruz. Between 1997 and 2010, he was Consultant Professor of Comparative Literature and German Studies at Stanford University. He is a Fellow of the American Philosophical Society and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His numerous and acclaimed publications include *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1973. German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Portugese, Korean, Chinese, Greek translations); *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1978. German, Spanish, Portugese, Italian translations); and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1986. German, Spanish, and Portugese translations). Professor White is also an accomplished translator, having translated from Italian, Carlo Antoni, *From History to Sociology* and, from French, Lucien Goldmann, *The Human Sciences and Philosophy* (with Robert Anchor).

Truth and Disbelief



Auschwitz

Genres, Figures, Devices

- Saul Friedlander's book, Years of Extermination, Vol. 2 of his Nazi Germany and the Jews, begins with an epigraph which is a quotation from a diary written by a victim of the Holocaust, Stefan Ernest.
- The "Introduction" begins with an ekphrastic analysis of a photograph of David Moffie's graduation ceremony from the University of Amsterdam School of Medicine on September 18, 1942.
- Vol. 2, Part I of Years of Extermination begins with an epigraph taken from the diary of Victor Klemperer, followed by
- An anecdote recounting Victor Klemperer's response to the news that Germany had invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. The Klemperer anecdote, which consists of two paragraphs, is followed by three more anecdotes relating the ways in which certain Jews in Warsaw and Lodz responded to the same news. The last of these anecdotes tells of the enthusiasm of Adam Cerniakow for his new post as Chairman of the Jewish Citizen's Committee for the defense of Warsaw.
- It ends with the laconic remark of the narrator: "Four days later Poland surrendered."

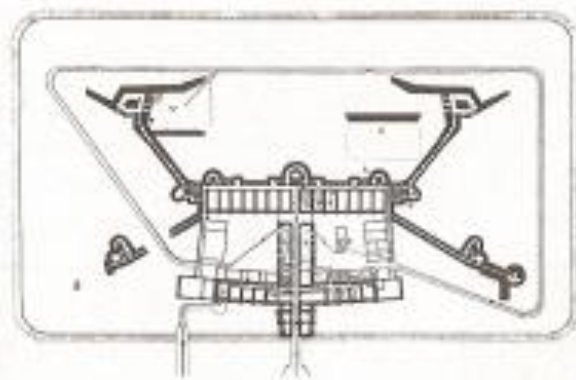
year, and large cumulus clouds were piling up on the southwest horizon as I crossed the bridge over the dark water. After the previous day's conversation, I still had an image in my head of a star-shaped bastion with walls towering above a precise geometrical ground plan, but what I now saw before me was a low-built concrete mass, rounded at all its outer edges and giving the gruesome impression of something hunched and misshapen: the broad back of a monster, I thought, risen from this Flemish soil like a whale from the deep. I felt reluctant to pass through the black gateway into the fortress itself, and instead began by walking round it on the outside, through the unnaturally deep green, almost blue-tinged grass growing on the island. From whatever viewpoint I tried to form a picture of the complex I could make out no architectural plan, for its projections and indentations kept shifting, so far exceeding my comprehension that in the end I found myself unable to connect it with anything shaped by human civilization, or even with the silent relics of our prehistory and early history. And the longer I looked at it, the more often it



forced me, as I felt, to lower my eyes, the less comprehensible it seemed to become. Covered in places by open ulcers with the raw crushed stone erupting from them, encrusted by guano-like droppings and calcareous streaks, the fort was a monolithic,



monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence. Even later, when I studied the symmetrical ground plan with its outgrowths



Diaries and Fiction

- “In a historical representation of the Holocaust,” he says, “the authenticity of the diarist’s identity and the veracity of the description or comment as perceived within its contemporary context give full support to the testimony. Even a hint of fiction cancels it.”
- Friedlander, Jena discussion, p. 13.

Magritte, La condition humaine



Moffie

INTRODUCTION

- “David Moffie was awarded his degree in medicine at the University of Amsterdam on September 18, 1942.” A photo was taken of the ceremony.
- However, “as we know, the Joad pinned to Moffie’s coat carried a very different message. Like all members of his ‘race’ throughout the Continent, the new MD was marked for murder.”
- This statement is glossed by a look inside the photograph, “faintly seen,” and in “characters specially designed for this particular purpose,in a crooked, repulsive, and vaguely threatening way, intended to evoke the Hebrew alphabet and yet remain easily decipherable,” are the Jewish star and the word “Joad.” It is “in this inscription and its peculiar design,” that Friedlander discerns “the quintessence” of “the situation represented in the photograph” and its sinister meaning: “The Germans were bent on exterminating the Jews as individuals, and in erasing what the star and its inscription represented—‘the Jew’.”

Moffie Photograph



Moffie 2

- “Let us return to Moffie’s photograph, to the star sewed to his coat, with its repulsive inscription, and to its meaning. Once its portent is understood this photograph triggers disbelief. Such disbelief is a quasivisceral reaction, one that occurs before knowledge rushes in to smother it. “(p. xxvi. My emphasis. HW)
- : “ ‘Disbelief’ here means something that arises from the depth of one’s immediate perception of the world, of what is ordinary and what remains ‘unbelievable.’ ” (p.xxvi)

Epigraph Stefan Ernest

- “The struggle to save myself is hopeless. . . . But that’s not important. Because I am able to bring my account to its end and trust that it will see the light of day when the time is right. . . . And people will know what happened. And they will ask, is this the truth? I reply in advance: No, this is not the truth, this is only a small part, a tiny fraction of the truth. . . . Even the mightiest pen could not depict the whole, real, essential truth.”
- --Stefan Ernest, “The Warsaw Ghetto,” written in hiding in 1943 on the “Aryan” side of Warsaw
- Friedlander, Vol. 1, p vii
- Not documented. But the quotation comes from Stefan Ernest, O Wojne Wielkich Niemiec z Żydami Warszawy, 1939-1943 (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 2003), p. 354. Lucjan Dobroszycki, ed. THE CHRONICLE OF THE LODZ GHETTO, 1941-1944. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.

Epigraph Klemperer

- “Part I, Terror,”
- “The sadistic machine simply rolls over us.”
 - Victor Klemperer,
 - December 9, 1939
- By using Klemperer’s figure of Nazi Germany as a “sadistic machine” as an epigraph, Friedlander can present an image of oppression, register a judgment on “Nazi Germany,” project the feeling of helplessness felt by the oppressed, and indicate the power of the Nazi war machine all at once but without having to document or establish the adequacy of the judgment.
- All of this is reinforced by the anecdote which opens Chapter 1 of the text proper, a quotation from the diary of Victor Klemperer: “On Friday morning, September 1, the young butcher’s lad came and told us. . . . the war with Poland was underway, England and France remained neutral. . . . I said to Eva [that] a morphine injection or something similar was the best thing for us; our life was over.”

Epigraph Abraham Lewin

- Part II
 - **Mass Murder**
 - September 1941-Summer 1942
- The proportions of life and death have radically changed. . . . Nowadays death rules in all its majesty. . . . The very soul, both in the individual and in the community, seems to have starved and perished, to have dulled and atrophied. There remains only the needs of the body; and it leads merely an organic-physiological existence.
 - Abraham Lewin,
 - eulogy in honor of Yitshak Meir Weissenberg,
 - September 31, 1941

Epigraph Moshe Flinker

Part III

Shoah

- Summer 1942-Spring 1945
- “It is like being in a great hall where many people are joyful and dancing and also where there are a few people who are not happy and who are not dancing. And from time to time a few people of this latter kind are taken away, led to another room and strangled. The happy dancing people in the hall do not feel this at all. Rather, it seems as if this adds to their joy and doubles their happiness”
- Moshe Flinker (sixteen years old),
- Brussels, January 21, 1943 (p. 357)
- (Taken from Moses Flinker, Young Moshe’s Diary: The Spiritual Torment of a Jewish Boy in Nazi Europe. Edited by Shaul Esh and Geoffrey Wigoder. Jerusalem, 1971. The original was in Hebrew.)
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Disbelief

- “The goal of historical knowledge is to domesticate disbelief, to explain it away.” (p. xxvi)
- “In this book I wish to offer a thorough historical study of the extermination of the Jews of Europe, without eliminating or domesticating that initial sense of disbelief.” (P. xxvi)

Estrangement

- “the aim of creating a sense of estrangement counteracting our tendency to ‘domesticate’ that particular past and blunt its impact by means of seamless explanations and standardized renditions. . . . To reflect the perception of the hapless victims of the regime, . . . of a reality both absurd and ominous, of a world altogether grotesque and chilling under a veneer of an even more chilling normality. . . . The only concrete history that can be retrieved remains that carried by personal stories. From the stage of collective disintegration to that of deportation and death, this history, in order to be written at all, has to be represented as the integrated narration of individual fates.” Friedlander, Vol. 1, p. 5

Evans

- “This book tells the story of the Third Reich, the regime created by Hitler and his National Socialists, from the moment when it completed its seizure of power in the summer of 1933 to the point when it plunged Europe into the Second World War at the beginning of September 1939. The approach adopted in the present book is necessarily thematic, but within each chapter I have tried . . . to mix narrative, description and analysis and to chart the rapidly changing situation as it unfolded over time. . . . A narrative thread is provided by the arrangement of the chapters, which move progressively closer to the war as the book moves along. . . . I hope that [the thematizing] decisions about the structure of the book make sense, but their logic will only be clear to those who read the book consecutively, from start to finish.”
- (Richard J.Evans, The Third Reich in Power, p. xv)

Holocaust Museum Berlin



Krieg



Crematorium



Auschwitz 1



Auschwitz 2



Synagogue Budapest



Auschwitz 3

