I am reading Robert Fagles’s translation of the *Iliad* (Penguin, $26pb, 0 14 027536 3). Achilles is sulking in his ships while the Trojans and Achaenians slaughter each other. Choreographing the moves with astonishing wilfulness are the self-serving, all-powerful gods. The brilliance of the poetry keeps the brutality always in the high beam. Every spear thrust, every disembowelment, every spillage of brains, every spurt of blood is revealed with lyrical clarity. The violence is unrelenting; this poem is almost unbearable. I've read the *Iliad* before but don't recall turning soft halfway through. I grant it was a long time ago; I've never had the desire to revisit it as I have the *Odyssey*. I take down Rieu’s prose translation in the Penguin classic edition. It falls open towards the end of Book XIV; my annotations have stopped a good deal earlier. I suppose one can imagine reading a classic, particularly one so well known, although I confess it is not an explanation that appeals. But, even if it were true, I am curious as to why I feel so overwhelmed now. And just when I was needing some respite. I finished writing my latest novel, *The Prosperous Thief*, a short time ago. Opening in 1910 Berlin, it sprawls across three continents and the twentieth century. Filtering through it is the long shadow of the Holocaust. During the four years it took to write, I read extensively about the Nazi years and the Holocaust: memoirs, histories, fictions, plays and poetry, some well-written and sparking with insight, others not, but all portraying the hatred and violence which characterised that time. When my novel was finished, I needed a change and I reached for the ancient Greeks — as far from the barbarous twentieth century as possible. I was not thinking clearly. Fagles’s translation of the *Iliad* has much the same effect as the most powerful of the Holocaust material. Paul Celan's poetry, Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved*, George Steiner's *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, Cynthia Ozick’s short story ‘The Shawl’, Alfred Kantor’s diary of drawings *The Book of Alfred Kantor* — all these works spill the edges of the known facts of the Holocaust. They are imaginative, highly original, and unpredictable. Like the *Iliad*, they make for compelling, but abrasive, reading.

We prefer our terror safe; we like our evil tidy. We are happy to experience it in a mainstream history or thriller, or for a couple of hours in a Hollywood film. We don’t mind being toyed with, entertained, thrown onto the prickles of uncertainty for a short period of time. We know these portrayals of terror obey certain conventions: come lights up or cover closed, there’ll be some sort of resolution and we’ll be back on firm ground.

Real terror is not so tame. It is strange, unconventional, anarchic. Its tools are unpredictability and originality. Real terror operates within an alien consciousness, a foreign *Weltanschauung*. And real terror is so morally plastic. Simultaneously, it can flaunt ethical opposites. Take Rwanda and the slaughter of the Tutsis (and also many liberal Hutus). What was terror to the Tutsis was an act of righteousness from the perspective of the Hutus. Not even the slaughter of millions, it would seem, gives rise to an absolute, unequivocal evil. The ancient entrenched hatreds that pit Serbians against Croats, and both of them against the former Yugoslavia’s Muslims, also demonstrate the amazing plasticity of terror’s moral skin. Perpetrators come to act as if on a holy mission. There’s a huge and brutal crowd dining with the gods.

In the *Iliad*, gods and men are as dangerous and, to my modern sensibility, as inhumane as each other. I find myself wrenched into a world where men are not as I know them and the gods are terrifying. The men don’t know themselves either: they lack the same sort of self-consciousness we moderns possess. There’s no suggestion that while Achilles sits in his ships and his fellow Achaenians die, he feels any of the remorse, guilt or responsibility that we would. Achilles has been wronged, and the only response for him is to punish the culprit even if it means suffering other losses — though that proviso is even too modern for Achilles. His withdrawal from battle is a matter of honour. When he decides to fight again, it is largely to avenge the death of his friend Patroclus.

It is not only men in the *Iliad* whose brutality is fuelled by a defence of honour, but also the gods, both male and female. (In the mortal world, honour seems to be a peculiarly male quality. What separates the immortal gods, one from another, is their relative power, not their gender.) In the world of the
ancient Greeks, men are the tools of the gods, so perhaps it is not surprising that the mortal men and the immortal gods act in strikingly similar ways with their jealousies, their envies, their spoiled honour, their lies, their secrets, their favourites. The power of the gods might well be spiked with mystery and magic, but the outcomes — whether of men’s actions or the gods’ — are much the same. In the process of brutality, men, like the gods who orchestrate their behaviour, act with absolute right and absolute power. Much the same observation could be made for perpetrators of genocide.

The Iliad, certainly Fagles’s verse translation, is neither tidy nor predictable. The terror does not operate in the same way as, say, Solzhenitsyn’s terror (Solzhenitsyn wrote the book, it was first published in America, so clearly Solzhenitsyn escaped death in the gulag); or Erich Maria Remarque’s terror in All Quiet on the Western Front, where we know the soldier is doomed, we know that Germany will fall, and we travel with the soldier as he inexorably meets his fate. The Iliad is different. Firstly, the perspective keeps changing. We are always thrown into the bloodiest part of the battle, and, as the perspective shifts, so we have to make a shift too — of sensibility rather than allegiance. Next, whether Trojans, Achaeans or gods, they all act with much the same violence. But mostly this terror is not tidy because it is strange, as Kafka’s The Trial is strange, or Brecht’s Mother Courage.

Brecht, with his ‘alienation effect’, deliberately set out to fracture the connection between the audience and the drama being enacted on the stage. Rather than audience identification with the characters and their situations, Brecht sought to bring the audience hard up against a strange and disquieting drama. This is what happens with the Iliad. All expectations are thrown to the winds as the reader is immersed in a destabilising new order where men are pitted against other men and the usual reader cushion of identification with one or other of the characters is denied. It is hard to find an enduring hero in the Iliad. It is hard to find anything that is familiar. Equally strange is the fuel of the fight, those ideas of honour, of obedience to the gods and unquestioned acceptance of oracular predictions. We moderns might be well acquainted with religious wars, but, in our time, God’s law has become inextricably bound up with nationalism, and the age-old hatreds that continue to fuel conflicts such as those in Kashmir or in Israel–Palestine are as obdurate and dismissive of interrogation as any rock of ages.

I have no stake in the Trojan wars. The violence is not tempered by personal allegiance nor any other type of identification. It is stark, and it is horrible. So why didn’t I stop reading? The obvious answer is that, as a self-respecting member of the literati, I needed to acquire the Fagles stripes — although I could have read, say, a third, and bluffed my way through the rest. But there is something else operating here. There is something irresistibly seductive about this material. (In Greek, phtheiréin means both ‘to seduce’ and ‘to destroy’.) The Iliad has a surprise, an impact, that is unique. It illuminates the horror of hand-to-hand combat. It concentrates the notion of enemy and distils it in hatred. It shows in minute detail how a man can look into the eye of his enemy and then kill him. No other war epic prepares for the terrible conflict of the Iliad, written by one of the greatest poets and rendered into English by a master poet and translator. In a real sense, the Iliad is as new as when it was first composed. The narrative is terrible, I felt squeamish, but the power of the work propelled me on.

While terror and wrongdoing have long captured the interest of writers, artists and scholars, the moral ice age of the Holocaust has refocused attention. The better the understanding of that terrible event, so the argument goes, the more likely it is that other acts of large-scale human destruction will be prevented in the future. Yet evidence would suggest the attempts have failed. Wars continue to rage, people continue to die from hatred and prejudice, and the Holocaust literature continues to grow.

There are trends and controversies in Holocaust scholarship. One school of opinion holds that the Holocaust was a unique event without yardsticks for comparison, so difficulties in understanding it are to be expected. However, the genocide in Rwanda, so distressingly similar to the Holocaust, undermines the Holocaust-as-unique-event argument. There must be, then, other reasons for the difficulties in understanding the Holocaust, particularly given the amount of data available. What the Holocaust was, what actually happened, who did what, when and where have all been well documented by a plethora of historians, many of whom — Raul Hilberg, Saul Friedlander, Martin Gilbert and the film-maker Claude Lanzmann in particular — have put the Holocaust under a microscope, documenting every nuance of genocide: the planning, the propaganda, the repressive laws, the threats, the day-to-day operations, the assembly-line precision that enabled millions of people to be killed so efficiently across Europe. We know all too well what happened. What is more difficult to grasp is that this travesty was the deliberate and conscious work of human beings against other human beings. And if they can do it, then so might any of us. Perhaps, then, it might be
argued that we don’t want to understand. However, this argument collapses under the sheer weight of material produced about the Holocaust. Not all these writers, film-makers, musicians and their audiences can be acting in bad faith.

Nonetheless, sixty years on, there is something lacking in the way we have sought to understand the Holocaust; something in the approach that seems to confirm what we already know rather than to illuminate the new. The most troubling effect of this is what has come to be known as ‘Holocaust fatique’, a particularly offensive response to the repetitive exposure of certain images of the Nazi terror. I refer here to those familiar pictures of dead skeletal bodies heaped in huge pits, or of naked people lined up in front of a gaping grave moments before their death, or mountains of shoes and spectacles and suitcases and false teeth and shaving brushes taken from people before they were killed in Auschwitz’s gas chambers. Even Auschwitz itself — mention the name, and a collective sigh rises from those who have already heard quite enough about the place. Mass murder, it seems, is too easily reduced to signs, symbols and a few overexposed images. And when this occurs, critical and penetrating analysis is a casualty.

Into this context comes a highly controversial art exhibition, Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art, which opened at the Jewish Museum in New York City in March 2002. This exhibition, curated by Norman L. Kleeblatt (a 53-year-old American of German-Jewish heritage, whose grandparents and great-grandparents were killed in the camps), features thirteen international artists who use Nazi imagery in their work to explore the nature of evil. Some of these artists are Jewish; many are not. All were born between 1955 and 1970. Months before the exhibition opened, it provoked a furore reminiscent of the Piss Christ controversy, with many people believing the art to be deeply offensive. The exhibition scratched a number of raw nerves of Holocaust memorialising. Issues of who has the right to enter the Holocaust material were raised, as were the acceptable means of traversing that fraught ground. Many people, not all of them Jews, were affronted by the exhibition. It was an insult to survivors, it was an insult to the six million who were murdered.

The artworks in Mirroring Evil are transgressive, original and shocking. They take familiar objects, events and symbolism from the Nazi era and subject them to a radical transformation. Take Giftgas Giftset by Tom Sachs. In this small installation, framed in a white box, there is a neatly packaged set of slightly battered miniature gas cylinders; the one on the left is black and carries the Chanel label, the central one is a lively orange and from Hermes, the third is a delicate aquamarine blue, inscribed with Tiffany & Co. I’ve been to Auschwitz-Birkenau, I’ve stood in the ruins of the gas chambers, but Sachs’s juxtaposition of luxury boudoir items with the poison gas of the camp shower (the ‘camp boudoir’) catapults me into a new cognitive space, which includes both the mind of the victim and that of the perpetrator, as well as the vast commercial infrastructure of the Holocaust. It also aligns the Holocaust within a contemporary context: where so much human energy is dedicated to the pursuit of luxury goods, it is not surprising that efforts to understand are impoverished, and terror in the world proceeds unabated.

A number of the exhibits focus on the widespread fascination with the Nazi era. There’s a frieze of glossy photographs of handsome well-known actors in their film roles as Nazi leaders (The Nazis by Piotr Uklanski). The Polish artist Elke Krystufek has incorporated some of Piotr Uklanski’s photographs in her collages Economical Love, along with pornographic images of herself and a provocative commentary. The voyeurism, our voyeurism, Krystufek’s work suggests, is the same for all the images. Other exhibits undercut overexposed images of the Holocaust. Alan Schechner’s website installation Barcode to Concentration Camp Morph depicts three sets of ordinary barcodes in a line and below them what appears to be a mirror image of three sets of pyjama-clad, concentration camp inmates standing together in tight, barcode-like blocks. Is this how the Nazis saw the Jews? As a mass-market commodity no different from tins of soup? Is this how they were able to kill?

What emerges from these exhibits is an epistemological shift involving new interpretative tools and promoting new understandings, which are often distasteful and accusatory. These understandings carry within them their own spaces. The artworks reveal, but at the same time they imply that there is much more to be known. They suggest that the failure to grasp the nature of evil is understandable, even necessary; after all, as these works demonstrate, there’s ample imaginative space yet to be canvassed.

This exhibition is destabilising, and, as with the Iliad, there’s no respite to be found in identification. In fact, these art objects actually sever identification with the victim: the
gaze we are exposed to is either that of the perpetrator, or a fine-tuned distortion of the perpetrator’s view.

Much of the huge Holocaust canon has focused on the victims. Remove the victim from the Holocaust, and the landscape looks unnervingly different. The New York essayist and novelist Cynthia Ozick believes the victims, the Jewish victims, should always occupy the centre of Holocaust art. In her essay ‘The Rights of History and the Rights of Imagination’, she is critical of novels such as *The Reader* and *Sophie’s Choice*, which place other victims at their centre. The main victims of the Holocaust were the Jews, she argues. The *raison d’être* for the Holocaust was elimination of the Jewish people. Where six million people have died, there cannot be a tampering with history even for the sake of art.

Ozick is not against imaginative treatments of the Holocaust. She herself is author of ‘The Shawl’, one of the most powerful short fictions ever written about the Holocaust, a story that shows in an inexorable, almost incantatory way how survival was possible in the camps, and how murder of babies was nothing more than a Nazi game. It is her insistence that the focus remain on the Jewish victims that I question. For an event as unwieldy and intractable as the Holocaust, surely as many means as possible should be used in the ongoing attempts to portray and understand it. I welcomed Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader*. I want to know about the other side. I want to understand how ordinary Germans could have participated in such slaughter.

A primary focus on the victim can straitjacket understanding. Victims invite identification, in a peculiar way they actually colonise identification. So, while the artworks and memoirs with the victim at their centre can provide a microcosmic view of the conflagration, if they connect with the personal experience of the reader/viewer, they can block access to the broader canvas, and the full cataclysmic horror, together with the essence of such massive inhumanity, remains elusive.

The Holocaust canon consists mainly of memoirs, personal testimonies and documentary histories which have been published in the past quarter century. In the twenty years following the end of the war, there was only a trickle of material from the survivors themselves. While there are many explanations for this, including deliberate reticence resulting from a residual fear of anti-Semitism, most of the survivors of the Holocaust had another agenda. They had been spared at the edge of the precipice, and, while they carried horrendous memories, they had the gift of life denied so many others and were not about to waste it. Across the Western world, but particularly in countries far from Europe, such as the USA, Australia and Canada, these survivors forged new and often very successful futures for themselves.

The memoirs of recent decades have focused on the enduring legacy of the Holocaust. Many of these are deeply personal accounts written by the children and grandchildren of the victims, not the surviving victims themselves. This development has accompanied a shift in the modern sensibility toward an inward search for personal identity, with individual therapy, group therapy and focused discussion groups all recruited to the task. In the process, there has been a change in the way victim status is viewed. Traditionally, there have been negative connotations assigned to victim status; after all, the victim, by definition, has been abused and defeated. But with the rise of identity politics, victim status is no longer something to be ashamed of — on the contrary, it is actively sought. Across the First World, people are wanting to reshape and refine their identity through acquiring a little bit of Jew, of indigenous Australian, of native American, of a relative lost in the Holocaust. Modern victims have a presence, a locus, and a defining history in the rowdy crowd of First World societies. Modern victims, far from feeling weakness or shame, display their victimhood as a defining mark of identity.

The shadows of the Holocaust are long. Many children and grandchildren of survivors regard themselves as victims too, and have explored their heritage and its modern-day legacy in personal memoirs. The shift in the status of victim has meant that many of these personal journeys have found publication.

The memoirs are important, revealing as they do insightful and often painful struggles with an almost intolerable heritage, but the dominance of memoirs has infused and skewed attempts to understand the Holocaust. The process of reader identification, of making personally meaningful distant and often mind-numbing atrocities, undercuts the complexities of
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One personal story is not the whole story, even less so when the memoirs have as much to say, and often more, about present-day children and grandchildren of Holocaust victims and their struggles in the hurly-burly of millennial life, than the actual experience of the victims themselves. When these descendants of survivors go searching for history, commonly they are seeking their history, not that of their parents and grandparents. ‘My book,’ as one memoirist, an adult child of survivors recently said to me, ‘is about me.’

The personal approach can also feed the sentimentalisation that has infiltrated Holocaust material. One needs look no further than the miniseries Holocaust or the film adaption of Sophie’s Choice. Or compare Goreki’s Symphony of Sorrow with Schoenberg’s overwhelming Survivor from Warsaw. Extreme passion is easily reduced to sentiment. The artistic skills that can match the human capacity for experience are rare indeed.

We in the First World are very much driven in our interpretative schemas by the notion of self-consciousness (ours is an ‘age of frightful self-consciousness’, wrote Iris Murdoch), and fuelling this self-consciousness is the process of identification. But, surely, what is required to understand extreme and foreign human acts is consciousness in which the perceiving self is actually muted. While we are driven by self-consciousness, the self tends to be a dominating and distorting influence. The self is hungry for connections: it propels towards the familiar rather than towards the new. In the Iliad, because I did not, could not, identify with the characters and the events, the texture of those foreign characters and times was starkly and painfully illuminated. It was not a comfortable read, but it did make me wiser, as the view from the margins invariably does.

By promoting identification with the victim, as does much Holocaust material, the canvas of the Holocaust is not only vastly reduced (and, similarly, understanding of those horrendous times), but it is also distorted. Imagine viewing only half a painting — impossible to appreciate the whole from only a half; impossible to appreciate a book fully if one stops a few chapters shy of the end. Perhaps the key to understanding the Holocaust is to see it from several perspectives — as uncomfortable as that might be — to loosen the usual strings of identification, to take the data in gulp after awful gulp. The issue here is one of reading to understand as against reading for self-affirmation.

This has many repercussions for understanding the Holocaust. Rather than more memoirs, it suggests that where the material taps most deeply into the unfamiliar margins of the imagination, new understandings are more likely to emerge.

What is required are interpretative models that block the intrusion of self, because what needs to be understood is a situation that defies identification, a situation that is outside experience. Homer’s Iliad, like the images in Mirroring Evil, brings extreme acts hard up against one’s normal moral sphere, and they grate. We can ignore the discomforts and return to our tea and crumpets, or we can begin to engage and address them. While we restrict our approach to understanding through identification and personal experience, the extent and complexity of the material will remain elusive. At the same time, while such events remain extreme, unique and outside our interpretative framework, their otherness actually protects them and wisdom recedes even further.

The Mirroring Evil exhibition extends the boundaries of understanding. But then art, including fiction, has long been recognised as an effective means of revealing the previously unknown — but not all art. Art can just as easily shadow, distort, lie and confuse as it can illuminate.

With portrayals of the Holocaust, the iconography of evil and the iconography of victimhood have often coalesced with paralysing effect. This is further exacerbated by the fact that some of the symbols, such as the swastika or tattooed numbers on an outstretched arm, have received such repeated exposure they have tended to replace, even obliterate, what they originally signified. The symbol has become separated from its referent; it no longer portrays meaning, it stifles it.

In the same way that iconography can lose its power, traditional and overused pedagogical approaches to the Holocaust can pollute both attitude (e.g. Holocaust fatigue) and understanding. Approaches which use fresh metaphors and make new connections between the existing data are needed to penetrate both the Holocaust material and our own habitual responses, which is what occurs in the Mirroring Evil exhibition. Such approaches can be horrifying and uncomfortable, but perhaps only radically different triggers are powerful enough to open bored and blasé minds to new ideas.

Plato wasn’t scare-mongering when he wanted to banish the artists: art can be dangerous stuff. Throughout human history, repressive régimes have sought to silence their most creative artists. Hitler was a champion of accessible, often sentimental, ‘beautiful’ art. The official art of the Soviet years bulged with realistic portrayals of happy workers and powerful machines while poets like Akhmatova and Mandelstam were persecuted. Art loosened from pragmatic purposes — creative, boundary-shifting art — clarifies and illuminates. Histories and memoirs are all very fine, but, if there’s a black
and bristling unknown to be traversed, the unfettered imagination provides a fertile resource.

Unfortunately, language, like other symbols, can also be subjected to a numbing evisceration of meaning. Language can readily incarcerate a mind, and it can do so with such slick and attractive precision that the abuse can pass unnoticed. This is readily apparent when language is used to reduce people and events to labels, to linguistic ideal types: when desperate people become queue-jumpers and unemployed people become dole-bludgers; when killing Jews becomes the final solution and killing Bosnian Muslims becomes ethnic cleansing; when Israelis become occupiers and Palestinians become terrorists.

Symbols can construct a veneer over the essence of a thing. They supply order where the reality is chaos. When people and events are captured as ideal types, they become isolated from intellectual interrogation and encapsulated as complete and impregnable entities. Of course, in a sense, every word acts as an ideal type, as Magritte so neatly showed in his *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* paintings; a pipe is not a pipe, neither the visual representation of a pipe nor the word ‘pipe’. All language distorts and dilutes experience. When I say that a particular food is sweet and spicy and delicious, you cannot know whether I am referring to a mince tart, a curry (Indian? Afghan? Thai?), gazpacho, sweet and sour tofu, or any one of hundreds of foods. Language can be deceptively precise.

But, where language is used creatively, where it resists pre-defined categories and clichés, where it sparkles with newness, it has extraordinary power. George Steiner made just this point in *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, in which a group of Nazi-hunters find Hitler, now a very old man, in the Amazon jungle. They are instructed not to let him speak, for in Hitler was created a man ‘whose mouth shall be as a furnace and whose tongue as a sword laying waste. He will know the grammar of hell and teach it to others’. When I say that a particular food is sweet and spicy and delicious, you cannot know whether I am referring to a mince tart, a curry (Indian? Afghan? Thai?), gazpacho, sweet and sour tofu, or any one of hundreds of foods. Language can be deceptively precise.

The imagination has carte blanche in the vortices of silence, and, while it might end up in some black hole, an informed imagination provides the best means of illuminating the hitherto unknown. When it comes to events that have been well-documented, and around which certain symbols have become entrenched, a new imaginative incursion is imperative. Keep using the same symbols, and understanding will not change much. Indeed, representations such as the swastika, the Nazi salute and long black boots have actually assimilated the unassimilable, have, in a sense, normalised horror. Similarly, tidy euphemisms such as ‘final solution’. Imaginative symbolic usage traverses all art forms, and, in the process, it co-opts a variety of tools, including fantasy, humour and irony. Indeed, humour, more than any other quality, subverts the taken-for-granted world, peeling away the civilising and ordering effects of commonly known and shared symbols. This is why humour often lurks at the borders of good taste, and why it can provoke such discomfort.

There has been a particular etiquette in Holocaust education and remembrance that has privileged historical and documentary discourses over imaginative ones. The former are considered to be ‘more effective and morally responsible [my italics] in teaching the historical events … Accordingly, art in general [has been] problematic because it is imaginative not documentary.’ The Holocaust has been gilded with the sacred; any tampering with the seriousness or uniqueness of the event has resulted in outrage and personal hurt. The more imaginative, which is to say less ‘true’ in terms of respect and ownership, the more the Holocaust — or perhaps the Holocaust canon — is seen to have been violated.

When the Holocaust is sacralised, when it can only be approached in one or two prescribed ways, when it is confined to an interpretative Petri dish, there results an inadvertent degradation of the material one seeks to understand. It is an approach that could be regarded as propagandist: as promoting certain arguments over others, certain beliefs, certain perspectives. Exhibitions such as *Mirroring Evil* supply a new ‘epistemic-artistic thrust’ (van Alphen’s term), wherein remembrance itself enters new epistemological fields. That it is provocative and shocking may cause discomfort, but that does not make it any less truthful. As for etiquette, wherever it prevails, interrogation and understanding are sidelined.

Like *Mirroring Evil*, fiction, too, can open new corridors to understanding. Fiction dramatises and provides multiple perspectives. Loose-limbed fiction can range over a myriad of places and times and experiences. Fiction can present competing gazes and inculcate conflicting and changing identifications. Good literature selects and directs attention. It presents a huge landscape, which cannot be taken in at a glance, so we attend now to this and now to that. And good literature is above all lucid. An imagination that knows its freedom — in either the writer or reader — can go anywhere. Where an event is very complex, a novel can wend its way through all the contingencies, the doubts, the motivations, and all the diverse and often conflicting perceptions. Cynthia Ozick believes that art should not tamper with the known facts of the Holocaust. But what about the unknown issues? We are still grappling to understand this mind-stretching event, and of all the human tools we have, it is the unfettered imagination that is most likely to yield surprises. History documents while art reveals.

The way to knowledge is haphazard. It makes use of false starts and wrong turnings, of biases and prejudices, of assumptions as well as the more logical and structured approaches to learning. According to Adorno, this is how it should be: ‘For the value of a thought is measured by its
distance from the continuity of the familiar.' Art provides a vehicle to the previously unknown; profound art stretches the boundaries of reason and opens the way to enlightenment. In the years ahead, as we continue to revisit the horror landscape of the Holocaust, it will be painting, sculpture, music, film, fiction and poetry which forge a deeper comprehension of that dark and terrible wasteland. As for the Iliad, it will live on as one of the most profound and revelatory documents of the darkness in the depths of the human heart.

Endnotes
1. Evil is one of the many moral spokes to the terror hub. Evil has an evaluative quality that terrible acts in and of themselves do not have. Some years ago, I would have wanted to align myself with the Platonist ideal of an a priori good. I believed there was not a corresponding a priori evil. This view has been fundamentally challenged by the extent and diversity of evil-emanating acts occurring simultaneously across the planet at the hands of vastly different human beings. The human capacity for evil-doing is staggering, and while this is not the same as saying we are naturally predisposed to it, the capacity being so commonly manifested is at the very least strongly suggestive of a human affinity with evil.
2. Evil is so easily fetishised — and thereby trivialised. There has been an eager borrowing of Nazi styles and paraphernalia in pornography. Indeed, one wonders how very different sadomasochistic sex acts must have looked prior to the Nazi era.
4. Included in Ozick’s most recent collection Quarrel and Quandary, Knopf, 2000.
6. Norman Finkelstein in his controversial book, The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering, (Verso, 2000), is critical of what he regards as a blow-out in the number of survivors of the Nazi holocaust (distinct from The Holocaust — an ‘ideological representation of the Nazi holocaust’). The initial stimulus for his book was Peter Novick’s excellent study The Holocaust in American Life (Houghton Mifflin, 1999) which tracks Holocaust scholarship and remembrance over a period of fifty years and addresses all the current arguments.
7. This is in direct contrast with prevailing orthodoxy in the film and publishing industries. Producers and publishers promote the power of identification as essential to the attractiveness of a product. ‘None of your characters is likeable,’ is a common complaint made to novelists by their publishers. Whether the producers and publishers are correct is not the issue here, the crucial point is there is nothing to suggest that identification makes people wiser.
10. Thus the outcry over Life Is Beautiful, a film, incidentally, I did not like — not because it used humour and fantasy in its approach to the horror of the Holocaust, but because the slapstick type of humour and child-like fantasy had a cleansing rather than revelatory effect.