

Introduction

Thirty years ago, Susan Sontag wrote an essay that discusses the puzzling appeal of Simone Weil for modern readers. Seeking to understand how a writer as intolerant as Weil could be embraced by a seemingly tolerant modern readership, Sontag made a general statement that is pertinent to this volume of essays on "tainted greatness": "The culture heroes of our liberal bourgeois civilization are anti-liberal and anti-bourgeois; they are writers who are repetitive, obsessive, and impolite, who impress by force . . . the bigots, the hysterics, the destroyers of the self—these are the writers who bear witness to the fearful polite time in which we live."¹

Sontag's appraisal of the "culture heroes" of our time is particularly apt as we explore in this volume what it means to accept the intellectual authority of figures whose bigotry is alarming. Her categories—"impolite" (the writers) versus "polite" (their readers)—is a way of getting at one of the more troubling paradoxes in the tainted greatness debate: Why is it that these cultural figures have no tolerance for difference, yet their readers tolerate their bigotry?

Assessing ideas and reputations that are at odds with contemporary values remains an ongoing concern in Sontag's work, to which her essay on Leni Riefenstahl, "Fascinating Fascism," bears witness. Exploring the attraction of fascist and Nazi art and

aesthetics for some people who do not embrace fascist ideals, she remarks, "Fascism may merely be fashionable, and perhaps fashion with its irrepressible promiscuity of taste will save us. But judgements of taste themselves seem less innocent. Art that seemed eminently worth defending ten years ago, as a minority or adversary taste, no longer seems defensible today, because the ethical and cultural issues it raises have become serious, even dangerous, in a way they were not then. . . . Taste is context, and the context has changed."²

After the Holocaust, our context *has* changed, which is why it is not only possible but necessary to reevaluate certain "culture heroes" from a different perspective and to question the ongoing dissemination of their thought, and with it their bigotry. Sontag's evaluation of the heroes of our modern age is daunting in its relentless categorization of their destructive elements. But other issues need to be raised at the same time. The intersection between any construction of "taintedness" and "greatness" needs to be explored, as "greatness" can generate a process of canonization, which then allows an easy, unthinking acceptance of that which should be questioned. Sontag's remarks begin our discussion of "tainted heroes" and how we reconcile their authority in our post-Holocaust culture. But her analysis provides no easy answers, witness that her essays were written thirty years ago, whereas only very recently has the intellectual authority of the modern "culture hero" been seriously questioned.

Today we recognize that the lives and works of an ever-increasing number of intellectual figures are flawed with anti-semitism. In the past several years, such writers as H. L. Mencken, Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, and Paul de Man have all been "exposed" in one way or another, usually through posthumous revelations, as either outright proponents of anti-semitism or associated with this form of bigotry in a damning way. Other important religious leaders, writers, and philosophers, such as Martin Luther, T. S. Eliot, Martin Heidegger, and Ezra Pound, were already well known in the context of taintedness: Luther's infamous antisemitic tracts, Eliot's pejorative images of Jews, Heidegger's self-representation as a Nazi official while

rector of the University of Freiburg-im-Bresgau, Pound's anti-semitic poetry and radio broadcasts.

For the modern reader, this alarming array of important cultural figures whose work or lives demonstrate prejudice generates many questions and perplexities. In their work they set new standards for aesthetic and philosophical excellence. How is it that they didn't seem to "know better" when it came to prejudice? On a deeper level, must we not ask if the intellectual legacy left behind by such figures is itself suspect? Is the prejudice an inextricable part of the work, or rather extrinsic to it? Is it the concept of heroism or "greatness" that invites or even generates the notion of taintedness and therefore needs to be reexamined? In contemplating volatile questions generated by intellectual figures who have betrayed us by expressions of prejudice, can good sense prevail in our efforts to understand how such a phenomenon as "tainted greatness" is possible and what an appropriate response to it might be?

Pondering these questions, it becomes clear that certain reactions are not particularly helpful or productive. Finger-pointing, with its inherent hypocrisy, obfuscates rather than clarifies the issues. Many of the contributors to this volume do not think simply in terms of decrying bigotry, thereby replicating its strategies and potentially creating prejudice toward these figures, but instead transcend binary oppositions. Singling out those important cultural figures who are bigoted is not enough: we must try to understand as well why they were canonized as cultural heroes, what it means to continue to revere them or read them despite their prejudices, and the role of history both in terms of their antisemitism and our reaction to it.

The existence and tolerance of prejudice has a direct relationship to the times that produce it. How "appropriate" it was for Heidegger to appear in Nazi uniform during the war must be considered separately from his attitude toward Nazism after the war, when, it can be argued, he would have understood its full ramifications. Embracing the complexity of these issues is crucial if we are to attain a meaningful understanding of the cultural processes that both produce cultural heroes and are capable of

desanctifying them. The aim of this volume is not desanctification: it is rather an attempt to comprehend how and why the figures discussed are important to our culture, both in their greatness and in their taintedness.

One reaction to the taintedness of a revered figure is to try, overtly or covertly, to exculpate that figure by means of a historical contextualization. Prejudice may have different functions and meanings within a culture at diverse historical moments. Bigotry has an index of acceptability that depends on historical factors. The exculpatory approach is a delicate one, which reveals both the complexity of the questions involved and the motivation of the critic. If, during the time of Martin Luther, antisemitism was widely accepted, could it then be argued that Luther does not deserve to be singled out for having indulged in this "cultural pastime"? Could it have been largely political opportunism on his part, that he actively disseminated hatred toward the Jews in order to further his own cause?

The recent heated discussions of what comprises a literary canon and how we view the canon must also be taken into account as we consider the issues of tainted greatness, and they are relevant to our understanding of what makes a cultural hero. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his explorations of the meaning of literary canons and their creation for African-American literature, says the following:

On the right hand, we face the outraged reactions of those custodians of Western culture who protest that the canon, that transparent decanter of Western values, may become—breathe the word—politicized. . . . That people can maintain a straight face while they protest the irruption of politics into something that has always been political from the beginning—well, it says something about how remarkably successful official literary histories have been in presenting themselves as natural and neutral objects, untainted by worldly interests.³

Gates's assessment of the political nature of canons and their "worldly interests" reflects as well as on the status of canonized authors. The distance from canonized work to canon-

ized author can be a short one. Some believe and expect that creators of great works must be great themselves, that there is a metonymic relationship between whatever power devised a work of art and the source of the power: the artist. This attitude can be traced historically to the nineteenth-century romantic ideology of genius and idealization of the artist. Some of the issues generated by the "tainted greatness" debate in this volume therefore include an examination of the differences between "tainted artist" and "tainted work." The power and especially the influence of bigotry is directly dependent on the mode in which it is transmitted. If H. L. Mencken makes prejudicial remarks in his private, unpublished diaries, should that prejudice be judged on the same level as Ezra Pound's antisemitic radio broadcasts? Does the existence of Paul de Man's early newspaper articles, written for a collaborationist Belgian newspaper, mean that his later works, which have nothing to do with the politics of prejudice, are in some way "tainted" by his opportunistic career choices as a young man? Is there no "redemption" possible? Are the politics of tainted greatness always in some sense a witch hunt, so that once a prejudice is sniffed out, it forever marks its author, like a scarlet P on a figurative forehead?

The essays in this volume adopt different strategies to confront tainted greatness and its ensuing questions. One of the problems raised in the first group of essays is the status of institutions that become associated with bigotry. In this first part, "Theology and Religion," Carter Lindberg's chapter on Martin Luther demonstrates not only the troubling nature of the anti-semitism found in Luther and the evil ends to which it was put by National Socialism but also the disquieting reception of antisemitism by generations of scholars after Luther. A compelling question elicited by his chapter is whether taintedness taints by association: in other words, if a tainted text causes what we could call a tainted reception, does this suggest that taintedness is itself contagious, and does it therefore pollute that which it touches? Can prejudice thus be figured like a disease? The irony of any vision of prejudice as a disease should not escape scholars of the history of bigotry: a fundamental rhetorical expediency in the

creation of "despicable" otherness is the figuring of that otherness as a disease. Could it be that the naming and transmission of prejudice is itself a deadly virus, and so that act of calling the other by the name of something infectious was always a displacement?

As we read in Lindberg's chapter on Luther, the transmission of prejudice may occur directly through a text or indirectly through the reception of that text. Lindberg's questioning of the reception of taintedness in generations of scholars who came after Luther is similar to one of the concerns that Alan Rosen brings up in his discussion of Gerhard Kittel and his reputation. Rosen cites a review of Kittel in which his involvement with National Socialism is ignored. Kittel's case is a complex one: as editor of the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, he chose the content of that major reference work; yet his reviewers chose to ignore the implications of Kittel's politics for that editorial control. Citing the example of one of the essays contained therein, Rosen demonstrates how the contents of the *Theological Dictionary* are in fact directly influenced by Kittel's politics. The institution of the *Theological Dictionary* itself is challenged: Rosen's chapter calls into question not only the work itself but also the ethical standing of the institution that produced it and of those who continue to advocate its use.

Adriana Berger's chapter confronts the status of the discipline of the history of religion in the United States after the allegations against its "father," Mircea Eliade, emerged. Berger documents Eliade's involvement with the Iron Guard (the Romanian Fascist Movement), which was not only political but intellectual as well, as she demonstrates the intellectual stock Eliade took in the ideology of the Iron Guard and how that ideology informs his own thinking regarding religion.

The "Golden Age of Spain" is the focus of Shifra Armon's chapter as she discusses the kind of antisemitism often found in Golden Age texts and examines the reasons for its pervasive presence. Armon's discussion highlights the relationship of the historical period to the appearance of certain forms of popularized antisemitism and provocatively questions as well the largely unchallenged literary institution of the Golden Age and its rela-

tionship to the Inquisition. In an examination of the meaning of opportunism, Armon speculates that antisemitism in literary works of the period helped "sell" these works, just as market research has demonstrated that sexual imagery helps to sell products today.

The essays in Part II, "From Psychoanalysis to Philosophy," confront issues such as the interchangeability of prejudices against different groups, internalized bigotry, and the role of fads and fashion in the reception of intellectual ideas, found in the disciplines of psychoanalysis, criminology, history, and philosophy. Sander Gilman's chapter on taintedness in the field of psychoanalysis addresses the work of Carl Jung, Frantz Fanon, Masud Khan, and Alice Miller. Having demonstrated how Jung uses Freud's Jewishness to explain the faults of Freud's method of psychoanalysis, Gilman goes on to show how antisemitism figures prominently in Fanon's theorizing about the formation of black identity and the ways in which antisemitism is woven into Khan's work in order to valorize one kind of difference (black) over another (Jewishness). Gilman also discusses Miller's analysis of circumcision, evidencing her view of Freud as the essential Jewish male figure that both generates and infects psychoanalysis. Illuminating the problem of how one form of prejudice may be adopted in a strategy to fight another form, Gilman shows as well how reactions to the Jewishness of Freud are used to express antisemitism within the field of psychoanalysis.

My chapter, "Lombroso and the Logic of Intolerance," also examines the interaction of prejudices toward different groups as it considers the attitudes toward women and Jews in the works of the nineteenth-century criminologist Cesare Lombroso. In Lombroso's work, the "logic" of his prejudice toward each group intersects with that of the other, so that the target of derision, whether Jews or women, collapses into a single invented figure that shares certain characteristics. Lombroso's logic for analyzing difference becomes a strategy for managing it. The Judaic category of *lashon hara*, "evil speech," is introduced as a way of understanding the philosophical ramifications of the transmission of prejudice and the legacy that prejudice leaves behind.

By aligning the cultural figures of Theodor Herzl and Richard Wagner, Steven Beller demonstrates that any discussion of "tainted greatness" must be mediated by an understanding of the times that produced both the authors and their works—a point quite pertinent to our understanding of tainted greatness as a concept not of a "rogues gallery" but of reception, influence, and changing views of what constitutes prejudice. Do we look at Herzl in the same light after discovering details regarding his own views of Jews and that he was inspired by Wagner? Beller's chapter implicitly addresses what kinds of distinctions need to be drawn between the critique of the Jewish bourgeoisie, which Beller describes as the primary motivation for the pejorative statements regarding Jews that not only Herzl but also other major Jewish figures of the time penned, and outright destructive prejudice (as most of us would define these same statements if they were made today). Beller's chapter makes us wonder if the motivations of historical context are enough to "excuse" prejudice. Does the concept of tainted greatness then extend to cover not only those perpetrators of prejudice but those of us who willingly and uncritically receive them? In Herzl's case, Beller shows that the "taintedness" (if we can still define it as that) was the motivation for the "greatness." With this cogent example in mind, we must ask ourselves if our view of greatness can ever be the same.

The next two chapters raise some pertinent questions regarding a reevaluation of Martin Heidegger as they examine different aspects of Heidegger's reception both in this country and abroad. Renate Holub looks critically at the legacy of Heidegger studies in Italy and the popularity of Heidegger as a model for literary criticism in the United States, as she reflects on how heroes are created and how they fall against the backdrop of her own experience as a German after the Holocaust. Elaborating the notion of *teshuvah*, "returning," as a concept within Jewish philosophy, Robert Gibbs's chapter, "Reading Heidegger: Destruction, Thinking, Return," demonstrates how we may "return" to a reading of Heidegger based on what we have learned from this philosophy. Gibbs shows the Jewish and philosophical man-

dates by which we are constrained to return to a reading of Heidegger, rather than simply to reject him for his involvement with National Socialism.

A study by Steven Ungar begins Part III, "Literature and Theory," which discusses major literary and critical figures. In his chapter on memory and history, Ungar sets out his argument by using the "gray zone," which Primo Levi describes as a model by which to understand Maurice Blanchot's involvement with right-wing journals and newspapers between 1932–1937. In his reflections on the problems of assessing Blanchot's involvement, especially in the light of what Blanchot himself has had to say about it, Ungar discusses the irresolution of this period of history in France, in particular Vichy.

Paul Morrison's chapter on Ezra Pound discloses the thought behind Pound's well-known antisemitism, analyzing the ways in which Pound scapegoats the figure of the Jew in order to displace a critique of capitalism. Morrison makes correlations as well to postmodern criticism as he shows Jacques Derrida's figuring of the Jew as not having escaped the paradigm in which Pound centers this figure. Morrison cogently reminds us of the intellectual content of figures of prejudice as he ably draws out the cultural landscape in which Pound's thought developed. Here, as in Beller's chapter, we see how prejudice is closely linked to its historical context and how our debt to cultural figures can exist in the form of unwittingly adopting their prejudice as part of their legacy.

In his chapter on Paul de Man and his disciples, William Flesch ponders the question of tainted greatness and maintains that "the fundamental question is: To what extent does whatever is significant in a thinker's work derive its force from that thinker's attitude toward Jews?" Flesch draws out the ways in which de Man's philosophy actually precluded the kind of hero worship we find among his disciples and defenders, a worship culminating in what Flesch calls the sometimes "silly defenses" of de Man's wartime journalism. Flesch asserts that de Man's later work was neither affected nor generated by antisemitism. In fact, Flesch notes, de Man shared in a rabbinic mode of close

textual analysis along with other critics such as Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman.

Edith Wyschogrod analyzes what "tainted greatness" could mean in the context of Jean Genet's work. As she states, "It may be useful to scrutinize the expression 'tainted greatness' not only for what such an analysis would bring out about the matter itself but because what is uncovered may expose deeper affinities with the dynamics of Jean Genet's thought." Demonstrating how an examination of the "linguistic archeology" of "tainted" and "great" illuminates these latter concepts, she helps to clarify what is at stake in Genet's pitting of Jew and Palestinian against each other in works such as *Prisoner of Love*.

The last part of this volume, "Jewish Reflections," places tainted greatness within the framework of Jewish thought. Joseph Polak rhetorically asks if, after the Holocaust, tainted figures should be read at all. His discussion is based on an analysis of rabbinic responses to hypocrisy, which affirm the autonomy of the text to the exclusion of other considerations such as bigotry. Polak then applies this rabbinic model to a reading of antisemitic passages in Joseph Conrad and looks at its shortcomings. His controversial viewpoint stands in some opposition to that of Gibbs, who maintains that we have an obligation to return to a reading of Heidegger. It also differs from that of the last chapter of the volume by Joshua Cohen, who reflects on our duty as readers to read and to remember and not to ignore that which is troubling about our own biblical tradition.

In Cohen's study, which from some points of view goes even further in dismantling the myth of greatness than Steven Beller's, a difficult biblical moment is discussed: the episode of the injunction to genocide of the Amalekites, variously discussed in 1 Samuel, Exodus, and Deuteronomy. Cohen's analysis of the position in which this knowledge puts us can be seen as a paradigm for the tainted greatness debate. His study casts light on the always ambivalent nature of this position and on that gray zone between the ideology of power dictating what seems right to a particular society and how those same acts may be viewed at a later historical moment following a different set of values. Accord-

ing to Cohen, ambiguity is so inextricably present in the episode of the genocide of Amalek that we must accept it as an integral part of Jewish tradition. The hypocrisy of the ideology of power is highlighted through his discussion, and our own position as critics of prejudice is questioned.

Some essential questions that "tainted" cultural figures evoke regarding our view of canonized heroes and our expectations of them are raised in the essays that make up this volume. Do we reevaluate the lives and works of great authors after understanding and reckoning with the pernicious content of some of their thought? Is the "greatness" apparent in some thinkers and writers inextricably bound up with or even dependent on the "taintedness"? Can greatness and taintedness be separated from each other? And, finally, how do we teach texts that contain bigotry? In a post-Holocaust era, how do we regard the appearance of bigotry against Jews, knowing what its final outcome could be? The complex questions raised by an examination of tainted greatness must ultimately be pondered by the individual as these essays are read. In his 1983 landmark study, *Legacies of Anti-Semitism in France*, Jeffrey Mehlman remarks that "anti-Semitism, by dint of Europe's recent history, is one of the few taboo regions of speculation in our secularized democracies."⁴ We can only hope that this volume is another step along the path in breaking a silence that, in Primo Levi's assessment, can only mean complicity.

Notes

1. Susan Sontag, "Simone Weil," in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982), 91.
2. Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, 320-21.
3. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 33.
4. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Legacies of Anti-Semitism in France* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 84.

Notes on the Contributors

Shifra Armon completed her doctorate in Hispanic Studies at Johns Hopkins University and teaches Spanish at Cornell University. She is writing on the topics of courtly literature and female authors of the Spanish Golden Age.

Steven Beller is currently a member of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University. Among his publications are *Vienna and the Jews, 1867-1938: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and *Herzl* (London: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991). He was a research fellow at Peterhouse, Cambridge University, and has taught at Georgetown University.

Adriana Berger teaches in the Department of Religion at Rutgers University and has recently completed a book on Mircea Eliade. She was formerly research consultant to Mircea Eliade at the University of Chicago Divinity School, where she put together *The Mircea Eliade Papers*. She has published articles in the *Journal of Religion*, *Religious Studies Review*, *Dialogue*, *Annals of Scholarship*, *Estudios de Asia y Africa*, *Hadoar*, and others.

Joshua Cohen is completing his doctorate in English literature at Boston University on the crisis of absolute sovereignty in late Shakespearean tragedy. He has taught at Boston University, Tufts University, and the Massachusetts College of Art.

William Flesch is associate professor of English literature at Brandeis University and has written on the de Man controversy, Blanchot, and contemporary theory. He is the author of *Generosity and the Limits of Authority: Shakespeare, Herbert, Milton* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992).

Robert Gibbs is assistant professor in the religion department at Princeton University and specializes in modern Jewish philosophy and Heidegger. He is author of *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton, N.J.): Princeton University Press, 1992).

Sander L. Gilman is the Goldwin Smith Professor of Humane Studies at Cornell University and professor of the history of psychiatry at the Cornell Medical College. He is the author or editor of over thirty books, including the recent *The Jew's Body* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991); *Inscribing the Other* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991); the basic study of the visual stereotyping of the mentally ill *Seeing the Insane* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1982); and *Jewish Self-Hatred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). He is the president-elect of the Modern Language Association.

Nancy A. Harrowitz is assistant professor of Italian literature at Boston University and is the author of *Antisemitism, Misogyny and the Logic of Cultural Difference: Cesare Lombroso and Matilde Serao* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, forthcoming) and coeditor (with Barbara Hyams) of *Jews and Gender: Responses to Otto Weininger* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, forthcoming). She is currently writing a book on nineteenth-century criminology, racism, and mystery fiction.

Renate Holub is the author of *Antonio Gramsci: Beyond Marxism and Postmodernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) and is working on a book on antihumanism in Italy, France, and Germany. She is a researcher at the Center for German and European Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

Carter Lindberg is professor in the School of Theology at Boston University. His most recent book is *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiative for the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). He is also the coeditor (with Emily Albu Hanawalt) of *Through the Eye of a Needle: Judeo-Christian Perspectives on Welfare* (Philadelphia: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1993).

Paul Morrison is associate professor of English literature at Brandeis University. He is the author of a book on modernism, fascism, and poststructuralism and another on the construction of sexuality (*Sexual Subjects*), both forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

Rabbi Joseph Polak is the director of the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation at Boston University. He has written on Jewish law and ethics and on the iconography of the Holocaust.

Alan Rosen is lecturer in English literature at Bar-Ilan University in Israel. He has written on the literature of tragedy, on the Holocaust, and on Jewish-Christian relations and is working on a book on catastrophe in drama, the novel, and historiography.

Edith Wyschogrod is J. Newton Rayzor Professor of Philosophy and Religious Thought at Rice University. She has published *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and *Spirit in Ashes: Hegel, Heidegger and Man-Made Mass Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

Steven Ungar is professor of French and comparative literature at University of Iowa. Author of *Roland Barthes, Professor of Desire* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), he is the coeditor (with Betty McGraw) of *Signs in Culture: Roland Barthes Today* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989) and has recently completed a book on Blanchot and the cultural construction of memory in France since 1930.