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This book is for everyone, but I dedicate it to the Australian Jewish community.
Every story has a life of its own, and every life has its own story.

JACOB ROSENBERG, *Lives and Embers*

To understand the extent of the human tragedy of the deportation of the Warsaw Jews during July and August 1942 to Treblinka, one would have to frame the drama in single images and study the details; the faces of the victims. One would need the story behind each picture. For only in the individual stories could one begin to grasp the depth of the tragedy.

DAVID J. LANDAU, *Caged*
Esther, now in her eighties, is a Polish Australian Jew and a Holocaust survivor. When, as she often does, she declares someone or something ‘crazy’, she pronounces it with feeling and as if it had a triple ‘r’—crrrazy! I invite the reader to hear the main title of this book thus: This Crrrazy Thing a Life, the syntax and intonation echoing the linguistic and cultural world (the Yiddishkeit) of eastern European Yiddish-speaking Jews. Crrrazy covers a spectrum: from the gruff non sequiturs of Jewish humour to the delusional sadism of a planned, technologically advanced effort to annihilate an entire people.

Of course, not all Australian Jews or Jewish autobiographers hail from the world of Yiddishkeit, and this book attempts, so far as possible, to reflect the entire corpus of Australian Jewish autobiographical writing—a large and growing body of work by people from a vast range of cultural backgrounds, including many born in Australia. Jews have been in Australia since the First Fleet and on the whole it has been a blessed place for them. Australian Jewish autobiography narrates many successful and thankful Jewish lives Down Under. Inevitably the Holocaust looms very large in Australian Jewish consciousness, and this book reflects that fact; but it is important to see and to say that the Holocaust does not completely overshadow everything else. Jewish life in Australia has many dimensions and, as I have tried to show, Australian Jewish autobiography bespeaks an enormous range of experience, awareness and disposition.

How large in fact is this body of work? My best guess is that, as of now in early 2007, it comprises some 300 published volumes of autobiography and perhaps 400 shorter autobiographical pieces (a figure that includes shorter narratives published in anthologies). It might seem odd that one can’t be more precise than this, but for several reasons certainty simply isn’t possible. First, there are degrees of ‘publication’. Some of these
narratives have been accepted by commercial publishers and have all the trappings of a published book; but many are self-published, often in small print-runs. Most of these have ISBN numbers and other hallmarks of formal publication, but some are typed manuscripts slung together with amateur binding and lodged in Jewish libraries. Second, the less formal the ‘publication’ the harder it is to trace such volumes. I have relied principally on three bibliographical sources: Serge Liberman’s *Bibliography of Australian Judaica*¹ (together with his updated lists, as yet unpublished), the National Library of Australia catalogue, and the Monash University Library Index of Holocaust memoirs. Other—particularly Jewish—library catalogues have also been very helpful.² Yet a significant number of titles have come to light through word of mouth: someone knows someone whose grandmother has just written a memoir. Informal networks of this kind can never be exhaustive. Third, autobiographies by Australian Jews continue to appear at a striking rate. Most of these are by survivors who want to bequeath their stories before they die, or by their children, even grandchildren. However, Australian society in general is currently so enamoured of autobiographical genres that even Australian Jews not closely touched by the Holocaust continue to publish personal narratives in considerable numbers. In order to finish the present study I had to draw a line. I couldn’t trace or look at everything. Many more Australian Jewish autobiographies will have appeared by the time *This Crazy Thing a Life* comes out. In researching it I have consulted about 270 volumes and something like 300 essay-length narratives. The majority of these were written in English; most of the remainder were translated into English by friends or family members.

In an attempt to best reflect this large and impressively diverse literature I have divided the book into three parts. Part One, ‘Australian Jewish Autobiography: Scope, Contexts, Approaches’, is a wide-ranging introduction to the field. It surveys the existing body of work, including matters of genre and form; it considers demographic trends (for instance, gender and generational patterns), along with cultural and ideological factors; it offers working definitions of key notions such as Jew, Australian Jew, autobiography, memoir, testimony, identity; and it provides historical background on the Australian Jewish diaspora—its development; its inclinations towards self-sufficiency, acculturation, assimilation; evolving
attitudes towards Zionism and the state of Israel; and the massive ongoing impact of the Holocaust. Part One also addresses topics that crop up in more academic discussions: humanist and postmodern approaches to Holocaust autobiographical writing; and theories of gender, diaspora, multiculturalism, migrant writing, trauma, and racial/ethnic prejudice.

Part Two, ‘Narrative Art, and the Art of Community Narrative’, contains essays on texts or bodies of work by particularly significant and accomplished writers: Jacob Rosenberg, David Martin, Andrew Riemer, Susan Varga, Mark Baker, Doris Brett and Lily Brett, and Arnold Zable. It concludes with a discussion of a remarkable community life-writing initiative: the Makor Jewish Community Library ‘Write Your Story’ project. Many significant writers do not appear in Part Two’s single-author essays simply because they did not satisfy the criteria I employed in making my selections. Chief among these criteria were, first, that the writing possesses manifest and sustained aesthetic complexity; and second, that it reflects, even if only incidentally, a significant sense of encounter between Jewish experience and Australian life. I say more about these criteria in Part One.

Part Three, ‘Tracings: An Anthology of Short Excerpts’, contains a selection of extracts from texts not discussed, or not accorded detailed comment, elsewhere in the book. Given the vast quantity of material available, and the limitations of space, I was able to include in this part only about 40 percent of the material I would have liked to use. Here too I chose according to the quality of the writing (broadly understood to include dramatic power), rather than in terms of the content of what was reported.

Had this book been written by a historian, its structure and principles of selection would no doubt have been different: choices would have been governed more by the contribution that given texts, excerpts or ideas make to historical understanding. I am a literary scholar and autobiographer. The principles that have shaped this book reflect my professional skills and interests and, no doubt, limitations. Since this is already a large project, and because I do not have comprehensive knowledge of other traditions of Jewish autobiography, I have refrained from detailed comparison of (say) Australian and American Jewish autobiography. A considerable body of scholarship now exists for readers who wish to pursue such comparisons.

Inevitably, the book also reflects the sort of Jew I take myself to be. I am a secular Jew who finds conventional religious belief problematic after
the Holocaust. I do however feel a powerful cultural identification with Judaism—but always as a component of a larger and tolerant multicultural community. Like most Jews, and many others, I am haunted by the enormity of the Jewish fate.

This Crazy Thing a Life is intended for a general audience both within and beyond the Jewish community. I hope that anyone with a serious interest in its subject-matter will find most of the book accessible. Where I feel moved to have my say in intellectual debates, or to frame thoughts in more academic terms, I may risk straining the patience of the general reader. I regret this, but it is inevitable. Given the range of issues that arise in a study such as this, it is impossible to stay ‘on song’ for all readers all of the time. In places where the going gets too academic, I invite the general reader to skip a few pages and resume reading where I’ve taken off my academic hat.

Many of the autobiographers who feature in this book have experienced terrible things. It is remarkable that they have been able to build viable and vibrant post-Holocaust lives. It is also remarkable that they have found the composure to commit their memories to print. There are degrees of ‘survival’. The capacity to write autobiography is often a sign of survival of a high order. But not all survivors are so lucky. Many have lacked the wellbeing, and most have lacked the inclination, to write. This book remembers them too, as it does those who perished without being able to tell their stories.

Richard Freadman

March 2007
‘Hush My Wounded Soul, Dance My Broken Heart’

Jacob Rosenberg’s *East of Time* and *Sunrise West*

A people’s interrupted song

Jacob Rosenberg is Australia’s most accomplished Jewish autobiographer and a world-class figure in Holocaust literature. His two autobiographical volumes, *East of Time* and *Sunrise West*, span the three major phases of his life. *East of Time* narrates his prewar childhood and adolescence in Lodz, through to the liquidation of the ghetto and his family’s deportation to Auschwitz. *Sunrise West* recounts his incarceration in Auschwitz, Wolfssburg and Ebensee, his liberation, followed by three and a half years as a displaced person in Italy, and the early period of his life in Australia. Many Australian Holocaust narratives halt the narrative at the end of the war; others allocate a brief coda to life in the Antipodes. Whether or not they deal with the Australian phase, they tend to exhibit considerable stylistic unevenness: often the prose is at its most lyrical in describing the prewar world but, understandably, more mechanical when recalling Holocaust experience; where Australia figures, the writing is frequently tentative in its efforts to capture the nuances of the adoptive culture. Of course this is to be expected. Prewar European life, Holocaust dislocation, and life Down Under can seem worlds apart.

It takes a special writer to narrate such dramatically disparate domains of experience with stylistic consistency. A few autobiographers, like Israel Kipen and Leo Cooper, neither of whom was actually incarcerated during the Holocaust, manage this difficult feat, but most such authors employ a quasi-documentary writing style which does not aspire to literary sophistication. Jacob Rosenberg is different. In the world of his prose a quiet place is one ‘where silence listened to the wind’ [*EOT*, 62]; someone has a ‘voice like a spider’s footfall’ [*SW*, 77]; a woman about to enter the Lodz ghetto with her family and a cartload of possessions stands desolate, ‘her face a
tapestry of murdered dreams’ [EOT, 114]. Rosenberg, author of three volumes of poetry and prose in Yiddish, another three ooks of poetry in English, and a collection of English short stories, writes autobiography in a unique mode of prose poetry—a mode which deftly spans and integrates the various chapters of his life.

Born to a working-class family in Lodz in 1922, Rosenberg grew up in a remarkably rich cultural milieu. His father, Gershon, was a leading member of the Lodz branch of the Bund, a Jewish socialist movement which espoused Yiddish and sought Jewish emancipation in the diaspora rather than a return to Palestine: ‘Ideologically speaking, our school was Bundist, and distinctly non-Zionist. A return to the land of the prophets was not our dream, but rather to make prophetic the land of our present.’ [EOT, 79] Gershon was much influenced by the British Fabian movement. The Fabians, some of whose works had been translated into Yiddish, argued for evolutionary rather than revolutionary political change. In matters of religious belief Gershon was a ‘God-intoxicated agnostic’ [211]; one who believed that there was no God but that ‘one ought to live one’s life as if there is’ [13]. Gershon tells Jacob that ‘Bundist theory became my Torah’ [211], meaning that he and his ilk espoused socialism with the same passion that fired religious observance among Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews. This intellectual dynamism, an almost messianic intensity in the life of the mind, suffuses the prewar cultural world that East of Time so lovingly describes. The intensity is there throughout Rosenberg’s opus, but in a form inevitably moderated by tragic knowledge that includes the gassing of Gershon and most of his family at Auschwitz. Rosenberg’s first volume of poems in English bears the title of a fine poem therein, ‘My Father’s Silence’. At one level, his work can be read as a response to that silence; a refusal to let his father’s wisdom and the cultural world it so magnificently reflected perish at Auschwitz. The Gershon of East of Time is one of the great figures in Australian literature.

To live as if there were a God was to be a mensch, a good person whose deeds possess a beauty no less potent, no less beautiful than the beauties of art. On a freezing January day in 1942 Jacob makes one of his fortnightly visits to Miss Fela, his beloved former kindergarten teacher who now lives a parlous ghetto life with her goldfish, Rebecca, an adored emblem of better days:
The door stands surprisingly open. I dash in. Miss Fela is sitting on a low chair; as usual she is wearing her white dress-coat. But droplets of sweat prickle her cheerless face. Her thin white lips are like death, and her large eyes are brimming with tears; they direct my gaze to the aquarium. Red Rebecca, open-eyed, is lying on her side, virtually encased in ice.

With a small hammer I freed the little body from the solid matter, and as I took out the goldfish Miss Fela burst into uncontrollable weeping. Rebecca was the only living thing she had. But there was nothing we could do, there is no antidote to death. Lucky little Rebecca—at least she died in her own bed. What a great privilege, in those surreal days, to outwit the ashes.

I kissed my teacher and left, just as the first star appeared and lit up heaven’s callousness. [EOT, 182]

Soon after, Miss Fela is deported and presumably gassed at Auschwitz. The young man’s kiss is benedictory. The passage has several moral trajectories. It records a good deed done in extremity, though quite without moral self-congratulation. But there is a second good deed—the writing itself, which brings a fine woman back from the dead and honours her life of devoted community service. The writing’s profoundly altruistic orientation is subtly reflected in the verb ‘prickle’, which tells us how the perspiring lady looked, but also tries, through an act of empathetic identification, to imagine how those beads of sweat felt to her as she sat freezing in her chair. This deep care for the other is a hallmark of Rosenberg’s work. Like the Yiddish writers who so profoundly influenced him, his autobiographical art is above all about the fate of a community. In the Preface to East of Time he writes: ‘The touchstone of these reminiscences—their informing spirit—is the desire and determination of an entire community to remain human, even at the last frontier of life.’

Yiddish, that ever-changing demotic language of eastern European Jewry, had existed for almost a millennium by the time the young Rosenberg encountered it in Lodz. A rich blend of Hebrew, German, Slavic and Romance languages, plus whatever other linguistic materials happened to be at hand, Yiddish possessed two of the essential qualities required for the formation of a vibrant literary tradition: cultural inclusiveness, which could range from folk tales to sophisticated modern literary forms, and a mix of nostalgic affection and irony—a combination that enabled writers to blend
reverence for enduring cultural values with a critique of what they saw as antiquated, stifling and hieratical. Yiddish literature reached its peak from about 1870 to the first world war. The three giants of this ‘classic’ period were Mendele Mocher Sforim, Sholom Aleichem, and I. L. Peretz. The last of these in particular had a massive influence on Jacob Rosenberg, who cherished Peretz’s unflinching opposition to moribund cultural forms and his ability imaginatively to fuse the sentiments of religious piety and sceptical secular modernity. Yiddish was also a carrier of culture from elsewhere; indeed it was the main conduit through which the Enlightenment reached the Jews of eastern Europe. This was especially important in moderating the age-old cultural isolation of the shtetl; but it was significant too in a large industrial city like Lodz where Rosenberg first read Shakespeare, the Russian and French novelists and other writers who were to have a major influence on him in Yiddish translation. Solomon Maimon’s An Autobiography famously narrates an eastern European Jew’s encounter with Enlightenment values. Rosenberg did not read this text as a young man, but he did read Yiddish translations of the autobiographies of Rousseau, Goethe, Stefan Zweig and others.

Virtually any Yiddish-speaker spoke at least one other language. This bilingualism, the linguistic corollary of the Jews’ adaptive cultural condition in exile, was conducive to a reflective awareness of language as the currency and shaper of social worlds. The Lodz of East of Time, a place where ‘a penman was equal to a prince’ [EOT, 34], throngs with writers and others who espouse Judaism’s ancient devotion to the word in a form heightened by cultural displacement. Here as so often, Gershon speaks as a secular humanistic sage, a proletarian intellectual whose worldview is unclouded by scholasticism or sentimentality. As spiritual life battles strangulation in the increasingly grim ghetto, this reverent awareness of the word—the belief (as Gershon’s friend Mechel puts it) that language is ‘the physical manifestation of man’s spirituality’ [126]—encounters its lethal antithesis in Nazism’s systematic use of language as a tool of demagoguery, deception and repression. Rosenberg sees Nazism as a dream sustained in a devilish circularity by the language it breeds: ‘The dream had spawned its own language, and the language nourished the dream.’ [149]

He writes: ‘There are times when we desperately need imagination to pierce the darkest dark with a sliver of light.’ [SW, 19] Art then is potentially
the most profound power of resistance to barbarism—an inversion of Adorno’s famous but misunderstood dictum that ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’. Rosenberg offers this counsel in a short poem, ‘To Adorno’:

Art
transcends suffering
watch out poet
don’t create
by destroying

Leave this to
nature

For this agnostic Jew, the Bible—which he reads as secular artistry at its greatest—epitomizes the beauty and profundity of human storytelling.

Rosenberg’s aesthetic has four main tenets: language should aspire to the evocative condition of poetry; the writer should not preach, but rather dissolve abstraction into the living fabric of his language; writing should have deep roots in the culture’s folk tradition, as only such roots can sustain the necessary daring of artistic innovation; and writing should be of and for a community, not the expression of a narcissistic Romantic ego. It is striking and typical that Rosenberg often delegates the espousal of these principles to others. A writer from childhood, he recounts how in his teens he sent a piece to a famous author. A meeting ensues during which the older man tells him that writing by one who does not have deep cultural roots ‘will be as enduring as an epitaph written with one finger on the surface of a lake’ [EOT, 34–5]. Yuda Reznik, who taught Jacob Yiddish literature, proffers another memorable piece of advice: ‘a story without a shadow is a sad tale’ [27]. Rosenberg’s prose memorializes these doomed sages of the ghetto; but more than this, the work’s very existence, and its author’s ongoing passionate commitment to writing, confirms the continuing power of their counsel in the post-Holocaust world. This same humble sense of indebtedness, of creativity as a communal act, persists through the Australian sections of the autobiography. The aptly named Ivon Sage, an assimilated Anglo-Jew and close friend, first broaches with Jacob the possibility that he might write in English as well as in Yiddish.
Ivon’s suggestion has a resonant, almost Shakespearean quality that occurs in many of Rosenberg’s passages of dialogue. Ivon believes that writing in English will enable Jacob to reach a wider audience. He adds: ‘Perhaps more importantly, it will enable you to keep singing, in the language of your adopted land, your people’s interrupted song.’ [SW, 178]

This perfectly encapsulates the diasporic Jewish writer’s vocation—one that must continually adapt to new language worlds and must resume a narrative after periods of communal suffering and displacement. Thus, if the writer embarks on an autobiography in the adoptive language, he has to engage in a process of what Besemer calls self-translation,[210] wherein both the pre-migration and the English-speaking self must be brought under the aegis of the English language with its particular ways of conceiving and narrating selfhood. Only highly accomplished autobiographical writers can move from the ‘natural’ to the adoptive language world without betraying a strong feeling of narrative ‘interruption’—one that can mirror the interruptions of Jewish history. But the ‘song’, as Rosenberg conceives it, is first and foremost of the ‘people’. The fact that Sage’s wise counsel comes from a deeply acculturated Australian Anglo-Jew is critical: it reassures Jacob that even on these remote shores he can continue to tell his story and that of his people.

**Memory, trauma and imagination**

Rosenberg describes *East of Time* as a ‘rendezvous of history and imagination’ [*EOT*, 9]. In the preface to *Sunrise West* he writes: ‘Like its predecessor, *Sunrise West* is imbued with pictures and visions of a bygone yet ever-living reality—it is a personal weave of autobiography, history and imagination.’ [SW, xi]

This autobiography is not then simply a work of realism. Its major imaginative sources, which include Yiddish literature, the Bible, Shakespeare, and more recent influences from Kafka to Calvino, suggest that Rosenberg writes in—and has to some extent invented—a particular hybrid (I shall use the less technical term ‘blended’) genre of autobiography. As his prefatory comments and the books’ constant concern with real-world politics show, this autobiography also sees itself as answerable to history and bound by a rigorous notion of historical ‘truth’. Truth so conceived does not stand in opposition to ‘fiction’; on the contrary, Rosenberg argues
that creative fiction, with its capacity to select salient details and shape them into a nuanced narrative artifact that can be voiced by one human being to another, is indispensable to the writing of this kind of truth. In seeing narrative thus he is in good company. Nowadays most would concede that narrative cannot simply hold a mirror up to life: it must always select, must always reflect a given writer’s voice, point of view, sense of audience. To say this is not to deny its potential ‘truth’, but rather to suggest that our best approximations to ‘truth’ occur when various people with a serious commitment to its disclosure draw upon the resources of narrative and participate in an ongoing conversation about what things, including human history, mean.

Rosenberg’s two autobiographical titles allude obliquely to the relationship between history and imagination. The first sentence of the first volume—‘I was born to the east of time’—conveys (among other things) a sense of history and time that shaped the imagination of many eastern European Jews. Particularly in the shtetl, but also in a place like Lodz, the sense of time that prevailed among Jews was often messianic rather than historical. The master narrative was that of the Chosen People. History was understood in terms of Jews’ relationship with their God and the purportedly historical events that sprang from this relationship: the fall, dispersion and exile, the expectation of messianic redemption. In ‘The Chosen’, one of the 102 vignettes that make up the book, Rosenberg writes that ‘Jews are forever carrying on a love-affair with hope’ [EOT, 136], meaning that messianic expectation would usually take precedence over current misfortune or misery. The sentiment of hope, which reverberates throughout Yiddish literature, was put to the ultimate test in the ghettos and the concentration camps. Remarkably, some survivors emerged with their faith in God and the future intact; others repudiated faith, though without necessarily abandoning hope of earthly redemption—a prospect that seemed most plausible in a far-flung haven like Australia. Rosenberg’s sober but subtly vital art is in part an inquiry into the meaning and possibility of Jewish hope, before and after the Holocaust.

His descriptions of Lodz suggest that the anhistorical messianic sense of time coexisted there with what looks like its contrary: the secular historical doctrines of communism and in particular socialism. But in fact the two seem to have been entwined, since secular historical doctrine absorbed and
indeed expressed the messianic fervour of Jewish redemptive narrative. To the extent that the mythic and the historical were interfused, Rosenberg’s blended genre is both an outgrowth of and a singularly apt medium for the reconstruction of the cultural and narrative world he knew in Lodz. It also brings revealing narrative possibilities to the storying of Australian society, a place in which white settlement reflected Enlightenment commitments to rationality, and in which mythic time as understood by indigenous Australians was to be brutally subordinated by colonialism and its aftermath. One in Rosenberg’s position, of course, will not be preoccupied, at least in the first instance, with the iniquities of British colonialism, notwithstanding his profound commitment to multiracial and multicultural social equality. Like virtually all Australian Holocaust survivors he feels a deep gratitude to this place, which struck him from the outset as ‘an amazingly peaceful world’ [SW, 124]—a world where policemen apologized for knocking mistakenly at one’s door, and where early-morning revellers who availed themselves of a bottle of milk from one’s doorstep left cash and a note of apology [135].

The second volume’s title suggests various metaphorical resonances, including that of Australia as a new dawn in the antipodean West. To Jacob and his wife Esther, this was a land of history free of nightmare, where the Jews’ ‘everlasting Exodus’ [120], their non-messianic historical destiny, could be pursued in a relatively tolerant Western democracy, remote from Europe.

Rosenberg’s blended genre must also accommodate nightmare and trauma, and this presents a familiar problem. He agrees with Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel that ‘There is, and will always remain, a gulf between Holocaust survivors and the rest of mankind—a separateness which no outsider can fathom’ [54]. In a similar vein he argues that there can be no explanation of Auschwitz because Auschwitz, ‘unstable as water, graveyard of human decency, had no meaning, no meaning at all’ [14]. And yet he is not so sure: ‘One can understand and feel with those who survived,’ he tells one of his many interlocutors [155]. Like Levi and Wiesel, he finds that he must write these experiences—and that he can do so with some confidence that receptive readers will be able to identify, at least to some significant degree, with these harrowing descriptions. In *Sunrise West* he insists that it is in Holocaust poetry, not in ‘dry scholarship’, that ‘the scream of our
slaughtered people lives on’ [159]. A Holocaust poet himself, in both poetry and prose, he believes that testimony is most powerful when it is most creatively eloquent.

We arrived at Birkenau in the middle of August 1944, a summery morning like any other, yet not like any other at all. I can still see the troupe of unreal men in striped rags, lingering in a nearby field like an ensemble of resigned clowns on a condemned stage, raking grass. In my heart’s innermost chamber, enveloped in tattered years, there still hang the pictures of my mother’s terrified eyes, my father’s bleak gesture of farewell, my sister Ida’s numb paralysis, and the horror of my two little nieces, six and four, standing like adults in the queue with their arms up, awaiting Selection. And I cannot erase from my memory the sight of my sister Pola three days later, stretched out on the wires of the electric fence, her head shaved, her hands in supplication, her mouth kissing her death… [SW, 13]

These excruciating images are imprinted on memory in a way that seems to guarantee their essential veracity; which is all that really matters. The skill of the writing—the clown-like appearance of the desolate rakers, the characteristic rage-free tone of understated mournful bewilderment—deepens the description as few witnesses to these outrages can. Those who believe that trauma necessarily distorts memory should note how closely the core details of Rosenberg’s description resemble those in hundreds of other accounts of arrival at Auschwitz.

He reports another form of recollection thus:

Like most survivors, I constantly had to reassure myself that I was living in a new reality. One Monday morning, as I turned from Eildon Road into Grey Street and walked towards St Kilda railway station, a thought flashed across my mind: I had abandoned my pickaxe, an offence punishable by death! But I’m not in Ebensee, I reminded myself. But then, you never know. Perhaps I ought to buy a replacement in a local hardware store, so that I wouldn’t be accused of stealing.

At the station I asked for a weekly ticket, and all at once everything grew misty. ‘Are you all right?’ asked the woman from behind her little window.

‘Yes, sure. Would you like to see my identity card, my passport?’
‘No, that’s quite unnecessary. Not here, sir. Have a seat, there’s no hurry, there’s been a delay and the next train won’t be arriving for a few more minutes.’

I thanked her, but immediately wondered if the delay had been caused by the late arrival of fresh human cargo. [SW, 151]

Here Holocaust trauma crashes in on the relative calm of Jacob’s life in Australia. The memories come unbidden, momentarily paralysing the capacity to tell delusion from reality. Such involuntary reruns of past scenes are typical of post-traumatic memory ‘disorders’. The will seems unable to intervene, either to stop the flow of memory or to insist on the restitution of one’s customary postwar grasp of reality. Massive trauma has the effect of blasting occurrences out of narrative sequence and (so) out of explanatory context. However, in an instance such as this the disabling of the will and of normal discriminatory processes applies only to the delusional event itself. The act of autobiographical narration, which contains both the initial memory of Holocaust horror and its antipodean rerun of that memory, is not disabled. In this passage Rosenberg is able to restore the past to narrative sequence and understanding through the act of writing. The respectful kindliness of the woman behind the window suggests that restorative narration is not just temporal (seeing the original experience through two subsequent time-frames) but also cultural. Having this acutely painful disturbance happen in Australia, where bureaucratic efficiency is not usually associated with menace, helps Jacob to read reality back into the delusion. The recollective nuances at work here should alert us, once again, to the dangers of generalizing about the processes of memory, be they ‘traumatic’ or other. These nuances show, for instance, that an individual’s disposition towards his Holocaust experience will in part depend on the character of his post-Holocaust life. If that life is fundamentally secure and productive, it may render Holocaust memory more manageable. This is not to say that such memories will then be distorted by rose-coloured filters, but rather that a secure postwar life may better enable a survivor to cope with the unvarnished memories of life in a ghetto or a concentration camp.

After the war Jacob tells Sergey Nutkiewicz, his former tutor in political economy, that ‘the gods have endowed me with a long memory—which by
the way is not always a blessing’ [EOT, 98]. The comment is typically understated: the ‘gods’ have sent him enormous suffering and then, just for good measure, a memory that denies him the gift of forgetting. Condemned to remember, Rosenberg’s autobiography constantly struggles with the dualities of consciousness. There is the two-sidedness of memory: memory is a blessing insofar as it enables him and others to reconstruct the wrecked world of eastern European Jewry and to summon the historical record in cautioning against other catastrophes; it is a curse in that it threatens to imprison the self in an intolerable past. There is also a two-sidedness about the imagination: at its beneficent best imagination can fly the prison of the past, opening out new vistas of vision and feeling; but for the writer, especially one of Rosenberg’s literary sophistication, imagination must necessarily return to that prison because it is constantly enlisted in the effort to deepen testimony by transmuting it into the terrible revelatory power of art. And there is this further twist: the line between creative imagination and delusion is fine at the best of times. These two imaginative forms seem to draw on contiguous, sometimes common sources of energy and inspiration.

How then can we distinguish art from delusion? Rosenberg’s principal response to this question is that art asks what it might or should mean to be human; how we should understand ‘human dignity’ [SW, 103]. Its terms of inquiry are in this Aristotelian sense ethical. Here ‘inquiry’ has a certain force: it refers to a form of questioning which is to some extent guided by an individual’s conscious intention. Delusion, by contrast, springs from the unconscious as if by some unknown force and is not under conscious control. Delusion, like the involuntary reruns of traumatic experience, can imprison the self in a terrible past. Creative inquiry into that dreadful history can put the individual into a different and more productive relationship with the past. It can furnish a ‘usable past’—one which can produce insight, a degree of healing accommodation, and even autobiographical narrative, including accomplished art like Jacob Rosenberg’s.

To say that the past is usable is to suggest that it can be put to use; that one can go to work on it in a way that is directed by a kind of will—and also, if the enterprise is to be successful, by research, imagination and inspiration. It implies that one can (within reason) choose a relationship to the past. We recall that Viktor Frankl argues that a certain ‘spiritual
freedom’ was possible even in the camps; that ‘Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually’. One would like to accord this bracing claim a full-blooded endorsement. For those (such as myself) who have not suffered major trauma, it is hard to know what human depths and capacities can survive such experiences. Even a survivor like Jacob Rosenberg seems uncertain about this. In one exchange he says: ‘what outsiders cannot grasp is that sense of inner destruction felt by survivors. Once you’ve been tortured, you’re forever tortured.’ [SW, 155] Yet East of Time contains a vignette which concludes with Gershon proclaiming the need to maintain ‘our inner sense of freedom’ [EOT, 148] even in extremity, a sentiment echoed by Aron Wolman, another sagacious citizen of the ghetto [188]. It would seem reasonable to resist sweeping generalizations here. Some no doubt had their ‘inner freedom’ destroyed by the Nazis. Such people would probably be unlikely to write autobiographical accounts of their experience later on. Others, like Jacob Rosenberg, seem to have returned damaged but still remarkably human, and able to practise destruction’s converse—creativity.

Raymond, another priestly mentor figure whom Jacob meets in Auschwitz, is perhaps the most important commentator in these volumes on the issue of the past. His initial advice to Jacob is: ‘Don’t, friend! Don’t even try to think of the past. You can cry later, much later. Start now, and soon there’ll be one voice less to testify to what we’ve witnessed.’ [SW, 29–30] Jacob heeds this advice; so much so that, looking back, he is surprised at how seldom he and other displaced persons after the war thought or talked about the past. As we know, many survivors opted not to speak of it long after, even to their own children, the ‘children of the shadows’, some of whom were haunted by this silence. But there is a great difference between never looking back, never speaking, and choosing when one will allow oneself these dangerous luxuries. Raymond’s advice in effect involves adopting a series of attitudes to the past: don’t look back while your mind must focus all its energy on survival; later, when it is safer to do so, you can recollect, you can ‘cry’. If, like a Jacob Rosenberg, you were a writer before the war, and if the inner freedom needed to write has not been destroyed by trauma, writing may assist, may give voice to, the looking back that is done later. Mendl Blicblau, another friend of Jacob’s in Australia, remarks:
Our past walks ahead of us.’ [142] The Holocaust autobiographer, like any survivor, will encounter the past in the future, in one way or another. Writing it will entail capturing the presentness of the past, now and forever. In Rosenberg’s work time is often visceral, anthropomorphized, as if it has a mind of its own. Sometimes that mind is wilful, wayward, one of history’s instruments of Jewish demise: ‘Time had embarked on a precipitous, irreversible journey, roller-coasting along the brink of a fathomless abyss.’ [EOT, 92] Sometimes it is governed by trauma’s compulsive circling back to the scenes of horror: ‘I cannot erase from my memory…’ Elsewhere it gives rise to a liminal life of the imagination in visions and dreams, as when, in one of several brilliant passages of hallucinatory writing, Jacob imagines encountering his mother after the war:

I found myself walking beside my mother as she pushed a cart through the night. The cart swayed like a drunkard on our cobbled street.

‘Son,’ she said, ‘the last moments in the gas chamber were beyond the most horrible imaginings. I don’t know if I have the right to tell you how it was, but on the other hand you ought to know. You’re entitled to know about your family’s end, even though your father always said, Leave the dead alone and they’ll leave you alone. [SW, 109]


A powerful example is ‘Nemesis’ in East of Time, where a young woman, Reizl, refuses the marriage that her parents have arranged to prevent her from marrying her sweetheart, Motl. On the morning of the wedding Reizl disappears. After three days her mother approaches a seer in desperation. He directs her to a lake: ‘Sit by the lake and wait until the moon comes out. You will hear the song your daughter heard, and you will know.’ She obeys, and presently hears a beautiful voice:
I am Rusalka, the lake-fairy,
Abandoned alone,
Come to me, Reizl, my sweetheart,
Make my bed your home. [EOT, 50]

The tale ends with a soldier whom we know to be Motl standing ‘like a stone statue’ after the funeral in pouring rain until ‘the sky was about to swallow the last morsel of light’ [51]. As Rosenberg explains it, the story accurately states that Reizl and her parents occupied the ground floor of the tenement in which his family lived. It is also accurate in reporting that Jacob carried messages between the two lovers. But he has melded these non-fictional elements with a famous Slavic folk tale in which the lake fairy sings her valedictory song. The resultant fusion of artistic modes is perhaps best described as a form of magic realism in which imagination circles back from the painful ghetto actualities of the present to a mythic and enchanted past. This active imaginative response recalls the title of Bruno Bettelheim’s famous study of fairytales, The Uses of Enchantment. The enchantment, however, is moderated by melancholy and woe, so its effect is complex. The circling back is in one sense a release from an increasingly hellish present; it is also a creative counter to trauma’s compulsive revisitings of horror. But folk legend does not here function as a myth of consolation: Reizl still dies. Legend in this narrative serves two of Rosenberg’s deepest artistic impulses—to narrate tragedy, but also to reassert the possibility of post-Holocaust re-enchantment. The curiously consoling qualities of strange-ness emerge hauntingly in another of Rosenberg’s musings, this time an imagined return visit to Lodz where a distraught prostitute sits alone in a bordello after everyone else there has been murdered. Jacob asks why she stays. She replies: ‘I’m waiting for you to forget me.’ [EOT, 77]

Narrative craft

‘Nemesis’ is a beautifully crafted, self-contained narrative which is stylistically continuous with, but structurally distinct from, the stories that surround it. Set before the ghetto is sealed off, it is more concerned with life in Jewish Lodz than with its annihilation by the Nazis, though that later fate of course casts a retrospective pall over all the mini-stories’ events, infusing
individual tragedies with the knowledge of impending communal doom. The tale itself is about Orthodox Jewish life—Chana’s father, Reb Nachman, is a kosher slaughterer—but it is told by the agnostic Jacob who also peripherally participates in the events. His main role however is a narrative one: to make accessible to a general reader the feelings associated with this culturally specific set of events—indeed to imply that though the events are particular, the feelings they occasion are universal. Of Chana’s flight from the family home Rosenberg writes: ‘It is a task beyond the best of pens, therefore, to describe their pain and desolation when, at daybreak on the appointed morning, they found Reizl’s bed empty.’ [EOT, 50] Though this voice is technically Rosenberg’s own, its tone resembles that of a fable. In this sense the narrative is already pointedly aestheticized, already a work of magic realism, before the uncanny events foreshadowed by the seer occur. Rosenberg’s autobiographical writing, particularly in *East of Time*, frequently evinces this productive tension between realist writing and the more ethereal impulses of fable and magic realism.

The ethereal quality owes much to Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, from which Rosenberg principally derives his vignette technique, whereby the larger narrative is constructed out of short, partially self-contained narratives. Rosenberg, however, uses this method to convey a social and historical specificity largely absent from Calvino’s book. ‘Nemesis’ occupies less than three pages. It is longer than average among *East of Time*’s 102 vignettes. Some are less than a page in length. *Sunrise West* contains 63 such pieces, their average length being slightly greater than that of the pieces in its predecessor volume. This compositional structure, which is very unusual in autobiography, is loosely chronological, in a way that allows for associative ruminations and imaginative digressions. The vignettes are written in a poetic prose whose rhythms and phrasing require the sort of close readerly attention generally reserved for verse. The narrative trajectory is not identical in the two volumes. The vignettes that comprise *East of Time* recall a city frozen in time, terror and poverty. There is limited change or momentum in this shrinking island of Jewish survival, save for progressive deterioration in conditions as German policy tightens its screws on a powerless population. The journey at book’s end is on cattle-trains to Auschwitz after the liquidation of the ghetto. *Sunrise West*, after the grim early descriptions of life in the camps, narrates a journey into freedom—to
a place where the Rosenbergs can be largely free to script their lives, to envisage and realize a future. If the vignette technique is marginally more effective in the first volume, it is because vignettes are by their very nature better adapted to the representation of stasis than to movement, even when they are chronologically framed. Vignettes are essentially discrete word-pictures. Conventional realist narrative by contrast works through stricter temporal sequence, causal and other explanatory linkages, and a sense that the clock is ticking unerringly in the background.

The art lies not just in the vignettes themselves but in their sequencing, and in the ‘white space’ that separates them. Each piece has a title, and the range among these reflects the blended generic character of the book. Some, like ‘My Father’, ‘My Mother’, are matters of familial fact and could occur in any autobiography. Others, such as ‘Bible and Bund’, convey specific cultural information about the community. Still others—‘The Philosopher’, ‘The Improviser’, ‘The Melamed’—refer to personality types or stock characters from Yiddish literature or, like ‘Karinka’, to particular people whose obituaries appear in these pages. Others again, such as ‘Dialogue’ in *Sunrise West*, contain intellectual exchanges of a kind that Rosenberg encountered particularly in Russian fiction. Another group of titles suggest a fable-like strangeness—a strangeness often indistinguishable from the madness of Nazi policy—which transcends historical time: ‘Legends’, ‘Riddles’, ‘The Absence’, ‘Enigmas’. The countervailing tendency to narrative progression and chronology is provided by titles like ‘As the Days Darkened’, ‘The Last Summer’, ‘Final Departure’. Such chronological markers become more common in *Sunrise West*—‘Italy’, ‘Melbourne’—as do sociological references to immigrants, democracy and the adoptive culture. Here the out-of-time vignettes tend to announce hallucinatory visions of mother, sister, the world of the past. Throughout, Rosenberg’s love of people registers in titles that bear the names of family, friends and mentors. The foregoing is merely a selective account of the titles, but it indicates how various and rich are the pieces that comprise this narrative mosaic.

Yet it is more than a mosaic because the pieces are separated by white space: a gap between each vignette and the title of the next, and then a smaller gap between that title and the piece it introduces. White space is important in many forms of writing, most obviously in poetry where so much can ‘go on’—in the poem, in the reader’s mind—between stanzas.
White space gives the reader ‘room to move’, to let the imagination go to work on what has just been said, to fashion possible links between this and what comes before and after. Here are two examples from Rosenberg’s autobiography.

In *East of Time* the vignette entitled ‘The Pyramid’ describes the often corrupt bureaucratic structure that existed under Chaim Rumkowski, the Nazi-appointed Jewish puppet administrator, or ‘Eldest of the Jews’, of the Lodz ghetto. To this day survivors and historians debate Rumkowski’s moral flaws. Was this man who was ordered to organize the deportation of the city’s Jewish children a power-crazed monster intent on currying self-interested favour with the Nazis, or was he an individual trapped by history and trying to do his best in response to impossible circumstantial pressures? The second of Rosenberg’s detailed references to Rumkowski is less damning than the first. It concludes with this question:

> And in the end, who knows how many times, during sleepless nights, this man who projected such strength and confidence shrank back in horror at the echo of his own fateful words: ‘Mothers, give me your children!’? [*EOT*, 156]

The disinclination finally to judge a given individual is typical of these books, yet we don’t get the full measure of this moment of hesitating assessment until we pass to the next vignette, ‘Mercy’, a Job-like account of one Fishl Binko, who curses his God after the deportation of his young daughter and the murder of his distraught wife. Here again legend enters the story, in the form of an angel who tells Binko that God repents of his sins against him and offers him a new wife and three new daughters as reparation. Binko pronounces himself ‘overburdened with His mercies’ and is determined to commit suicide, thereby defying Jewish law but joining the other ghetto suicides, whose ‘faces are shining’. The narrator comments that ‘most of our legends are so rooted in reality that sometimes it’s hard to tell which is which’ [*158–9*]. Having read these harrowing paragraphs the reader’s mind circles back to Rumkowski. The white space between vignettes becomes a place of redoubled moral reflection. Well might he have been tortured in the night by his edict that the children had to be deported. But now, having read of the plight of Binko and his family, one is perhaps inclined to say: Nothing, absolutely nothing, can justify such
an edict. *Anything*, and certainly Rumkowski’s own suicide, would have been better than *that*.

‘Dialogue’ in *Sunrise West* contains a discussion at a restaurant between Jacob and an academic named Aaron Feldman concerning poetry’s role in reporting the Holocaust, the limitations of academic Holocaust scholarship in this task, and, in closing, the sense in which the Book of Job quintessentially expresses the Jews’ ‘unbroken faith in the future, despite betrayal by their God’—a faith in turn epitomized by the ‘postwar behaviour of many survivors’. Throughout, Jacob has made reference to his father Gershon’s views. As they leave the restaurant Feldman offers Jacob a lift home. He declines, explaining to the reader, in deft and beautiful phrasing: ‘I needed to be alone, with dad.’ [*SW*, 160] That qualifying comma before ‘with dad’ provides a grammatical separation between the Australian present and the Lodz past. Jacob needs to be alone in order to revisit the past.

The next vignette, ‘Linguistic Feuds’, plunges us again into the post-Holocaust present: ‘At the peak of Australia’s postwar immigration tide, considerable numbers of Jews landed on these peaceful shores. They had been liberated from the camps or were running from the antisemitism they still encountered in their land even after the war.’ [*160–61*] Then follows a scene in which one Morris Blattmann—a long-settled, university-educated, practising Anglo-Jew—urges an audience of migrants to abandon Yiddish and embrace Australia’s mother tongue. In effect Blattmann is asking these people to shed their cultural pasts. Understandably he encounters angry opposition, because such migrants’ ‘faith in the future’ can be realized only if they can acculturate in Australia in a way that enables them to maintain their cultural roots even as they start to put down new roots here. In this way ‘Dialogue’ informs our reading of ‘Linguistic Feuds’: the white space between them becomes a place where we can more deeply ponder what Jewish faith in the future actually entails, and see that it requires preserving aspects of the past in the new land, asserting continuity in the face of the massive rupture occasioned by the Holocaust. It is part of these migrants’ pressing need to create a ‘Republic of Memory’ [*143*].

The obese but intellectually vibrant figure of Feldman is well drawn, as are most of Rosenberg’s characters. His art, we might say, rests on three main pillars: imagery and metaphor (the wonderful suggestiveness of the
finger writing on the lake, the voice like a spider’s footfall, word-pictures that so powerfully evoke Lodz), ideas (as in ‘Dialogue’), and characterization. Memorably, he suggests that ‘Every story has a life of its own, and every life has its own story’ 217 Early in East of Time, Rosenberg avows that ‘I’m no psychologist’ [EOT, 13], and in terms of modern fictional and autobiographical techniques this is true. In his work, human inwardness resembles the interiority we find in Yiddish literature more than it does the Freudian inlandscapes of contemporary American or second-generation Australian Jewish writing. The hallmarks of Rosenberg’s psychology are its profoundly moral gaze (Freud, one might say, displaces focus from the moral to the psychological), and its communal orientation: mind only makes sense here as a manifestation and component of community. Even the feeling of solitude that haunts many survivors [SW, 58–9] is echoed but also moderated by the collective experience of exile. Ezro the Spaniard, another Lodz sage, says: ‘A man who has nowhere in his heart cannot go there. How can he be in something, when that very something is in him?’ [EOT, 99] To have a place in the heart is to retain and rebuild inner freedom. If you have that, and if you have it in community, you are never completely in exile.

The Holocaust autobiographer must convey one of the defining psychological states of many who endure, and many who perpetrate, horror: compartmentalization. This phenomenon, so brilliantly anatomized by the deracinated Jewish intellectual and autobiographer Arthur Koestler, 218 involves various forms of psychic partitioning and discontinuity, such that one can ‘cut off’ from what one is having to endure, or from one’s wrecked past, or from one’s normally sentient mode of selfhood; or can cordon off one’s conscience so that a Nazi can blow a young Jewish girl’s brains out in a forest and then come home and cradle his young daughter on his knee while reading her Grimm’s tales. Nazi representations of Jews as vermin, bugs and other subhuman creatures were in part designed to facilitate such compartmentalization: what better way to becalm conscience than to imagine that the live baby you are throwing onto the flames is but an insect you might tip off a cake-plate into the fireplace?

For Rosenberg, compartmentalization sets in almost from the moment of his arrival at Birkenau: ‘Within the blink of an eye I became bestially free, a lone caged animal on the prowl. Was this a prerequisite for survival? I
am not trying to explain, there is nothing to elucidate.’ [SW, 14] In fact, the subsequent camp descriptions do not entirely corroborate this asserted suspension of conscience and customary personhood, what Langer calls ‘the Impromptu Self’.\textsuperscript{219} Certainly he performs mind-numbing chores, like loading corpses onto trucks, and there are times when he experiences a deep apathy, as if he were a living corpse himself; but most of the horror vignettes focus on compartmentalization in the guards and in the Jewish \textit{kapos} who served them. Jacob and his friends, especially Raymond, maintain something of the moral life that Todorov, Des Pres, Frankl and others insist survived to significant degrees in the ghettos and the camps. Always reflective, Rosenberg wonders how this can be, and his answer, which recalls Pascal, takes not just the id and the superego into account, but also that more spiritual presence, the soul: ‘From my camp experience I could perhaps venture to say, with Pascal, that the mind has a soul of its own, and the soul has a mind of its own, and they protect each other.’ [SW, 63] While the soul is intact, so too is some degree of ‘inner freedom’. This sort of compartmentalization is fundamentally different from the kind that enables a man to engage in child-murder and affectionate parenting within a span of hours. That form freezes or kills off the soul. Rosenberg’s kind enables the soul to maintain, however fragiley, a coordinating and edifying presence in the person. It enables one to \textit{remain a person}, an imaginatively and morally engaged being, and not merely a ‘caged animal on the prowl’.

We might distinguish three broad registers of selfhood in Rosenberg’s autobiography. There is the incarcerated self, as just described; the post-Holocaust liberated self, about which more presently; and articulating these is the narrating self, a present self who stories the past and brings it, at the end, into close proximity with the present. One of the narrating self’s most important functions, especially but not exclusively in \textit{East of Time}, is to honour the dead. Having inherited his father’s agnosticism, and witnessed God’s apparent absence during the war, Jacob Rosenberg does not choose to say a traditional \textit{Kaddish} for his family or for the other Lodz Jews who perished in the Holocaust. However, art has its own spiritual resources, its own powers of consolation and commemoration; and one of the finest things about these immensely moving books is the way in which the writing brings the people of Lodz back from the dead, placing them vividly, lovingly, sometimes bemusedly before us, then saying a kind of agnostic
poetic *Kaddish* for them and before consigning them again to the grave. Here are some excerpts from the opening of 'Lipek’s Irony':

Lipman Biderman, whom his friends called Lipek, was a remarkable young man. I had known him from childhood...

Lipek was a well-built youngster with straight shoulders, a pitch-black mane that topped an elongated face, and a few freckles around his shapely nose. Two dark rings under his lower lids emphasized the slightly melancholic look in his stark black eyes.

There was a rare harmony between Lipek’s mind and tongue, and he had an extraordinary way of expressing himself. His favourite mode was irony. [*EOT*, 140]

And then the concluding paragraph:

One winter evening, as my friend’s temperature rose, two uniformed men entered Lipek’s apartment. His mother pleaded with them to let her son remain at home. They dragged him out of bed and handed him over to the thugs to whom they swore allegiance. At the break of dawn, while the gods were still snoring under their sky-blue eiderdowns, Lipek, renowned paragon of our youth, was marched off to a desolate place and shot. [*EOT*, 141]²²⁰

These shattering moments convey a tragically compromised enchantment: the prose that would recapture the beauty murdered in the ghettos and camps must now be shadowed by that murder, torn between a will to re-enchantment which defies genocide and a sense that enchantment after such horror is a travesty, or an impossibility.

In one obvious sense the post-Holocaust self is present throughout the two volumes of this autobiography, since the entire narrative is told by the survivor-author, now in his eighties and writing from his home in suburban Melbourne. But in other respects the post- and pre-Holocaust selves seem decidedly distinct. One is shaped by Polish and Yiddish language and culture; the other by antipodean English and its world. The two selves are separated by the massive—but not absolute—rupture that was the Holocaust. The current self is elderly (in years, but certainly not in energy); the Jacob of *East of Time* was young. And yet the experience of reading...
these volumes is not disjunctive; indeed, as I have suggested, they possess an unusual degree of aesthetic integration. One reason for this is simply Jacob Rosenberg’s special talent as a writer. Another is that in many ways the narrating post-Holocaust self is not so different after all from the Lodz one. Jacob lived long enough in Lodz for the contours of his identity to settle, and it was here that he learnt to write. This continuity is apparent both in the way the self maintains connection with the past through memory and autobiographical reconstruction, and in the nature of the self we meet in the second volume. This later self has a profound inwardsness and privacy; a vital if haunted inner life. But it is not introspective in the way, or at least to the extent, that second-generation Australian Jewish autobiographers like Mark Baker, Susan Varga or Doris Brett are introspective. Before he is transported by the vision of dancing with his sister Ida, Jacob is content to be left to his own ruminations when Esther is invited to dance by another man:

I was pleased to be left alone. I had come here only because of Esther; she needed this, I knew it would be good for her. But for me there was little appeal in the swinging firmament of Maison de Luxe, and since this was not yet the time when a woman invited a man to a frolic on the dance floor, my solitude was pretty secure. For a while at least, I was free to let my mind embark—as it often did in such situations—on an excursion into my inner self, the realm of visions, imaginings and other forbidden realities. [SW, 136–7]

Whatever the ‘forbidden realities’ might be, they are not gone into. It’s the ‘realm of visions’ that matters most and is most characteristic here. He recalls a conversation earlier that day with a fellow Auschwitz deportee: ‘I have no right to be alive,’ the man had said [137], and this now inclines Jacob’s thoughts towards ethical issues. And then—Ida’s ghost touches him on the shoulder, and he is off in the ‘realm of visions’, delighted and desolated by this ghostly re-encounter with his sister. The ‘inner self’ is here an ethically focused journeyer through memory, not a denizen of ‘forbidden realities’ of a Freudian kind.

In ‘The Voice’, Jacob again embarks on inner meanderings, this time at a Jewish wedding where most of the guests are survivors. The ‘voice’ that comes in his reverie is bitter, sardonic, utterly cynical: ‘Mere illusions,
hallucinations, mirages (the voice argued). Surely everything must be clear by now! Life is like a chameleon…’ [190] It preaches a fatalism that runs counter to the way he lives: ‘your fate was planned, down to the last detail.
Not even God’s own Adversary could emulate such infamy.’ [192] Jacob tries to fend the voice off, pleading the festive nature of the occasion. Esther, noticing his troubled abstraction, solicits his attention.

‘You haven’t said a word to anyone.’ Esther bent closer and tenderly took hold of my hand. ‘Wake up,’ she smiled. ‘Listen … You’re going to become a father!’

I came to with a start. And there and then, in front of our table companions, I embraced and kissed my wife. [SW, 193]

Now it is his wife with whom he dances. Incredibly, their murdered family has a future after all. If the interior dialogue perhaps seems slightly stilted, this vignette again shows that inwardness in this writer is generally outward and communal in its trajectory.

Ethics: post-biblical, post-Holocaust

The vignette ‘Beginning’ quickly becomes self-explanatory:

And the black magician said, ‘Let there be darkness,’ and there was darkness, and he saw that the darkness was good…

And on the second day he decreed that no Jew be allowed to walk on the footpath, or in the middle of the road. No Jew should be permitted to have a dog, cat, bird, money, gold, fur coat, piano, violin, mandolin, guitar, gramophone, or to breathe Aryan air. All Yiddish books and all writers who wrote in Yiddish were to be burned…

And then he said, ‘Let all the Jews be herded into one precinct,’ and they were herded in, and he saw that the herding was good… [EOT, 107–8]

Jacob Rosenberg is anything but a bitter writer, and yet—it would be hard to imagine a more calculated affront to scriptural authority, or to the canonical Jewish notion of the Chosen People, than the substitution of Hitler for God in this inversion of Genesis. Something similar, though less confronting, occurs in Sunrise West, where Hitler becomes the new
Pharaoh, precipitating another Exodus—at least for those who aren’t slaughtered. The last vestiges of his father’s ‘God-intoxicated’ agnosticism seem to have been swept away by the Holocaust. What then is left? How might we characterize the Jewishness that Rosenberg still so clearly espouses?

Mendel Singer, another wise friend whom he meets in a displaced persons’ camp after the war, offers the following definition of a Jew:

‘… not every Jew is necessarily Jewish. A Jew is a physical being, whereas Jewishness is a spiritual thing. This means, my friend, that an individual Jew can become an antisemite, a Fascist, even a Nazi, but Jewishness—as a living ideal of universal brotherhood—is in eternal conflict with anything life-denying.’ [SW, 89]

This formulation, with its repudiation of genetic notions of Jewishness, appears to represent Rosenberg’s considered view. Jewishness so conceived requires no God, but rather a commitment to a universalistic ethics and a sentiment of piety: a prayerful attitude without a deity. This impulse to see the divine as imagined by and therefore potentially characteristic of the human, to promulgate a reverent ethics not premised on supernatural authority or solicitude, is the quintessential gesture of humanism. He writes in the poem ‘Redemption’ of ‘the Messiah’s plea to man’:

To release Him from His bond,
Man’s eternal dream,
And bring Him among the living—
For the living to redeem…

Rosenberg’s image of an ‘authentic’ person [SW, 117] is not of one who has been chosen, but one who would be chosen if there were a God. This is a matter of being a good person, a mensch, regardless of creed. East of Time and Sunrise West are the poetic autobiographies of a humanist who had little religious faith to lose, but managed to retain a measure of faith in humanity despite staggering odds. Since there is no divine plan—‘Topography shapes a river’s character. Chance is a man’s topography.’ [SW, 79]—and no heavenly accounting of our deeds, there is only ethical
responsibility: to others, and to the self whose ethical calling it is to take responsibility for others.

The *mensch* on this understanding is not one who slavishly follows moral rules, but rather one who makes flexible and empathetic moral assessments in particular situations and seeks actively to do well by others. Evil can take various forms, one of which, systematically practised in the camps, involved techniques of degradation that destroyed the ‘inner freedom’ upon which ethical selfhood depends. While marching to Ebensee concentration camp, famished prisoners are astonished to find a cauldron of hot soup awaiting them. Their guard watches as the men surge towards it; he turns away, then back, capsizing the cauldron with a kick. Rosenberg continues:

> He stood there waiting to see our reaction, but to his disappointment none of us moved: everyone remained frozen to the spot. At the time I didn’t really know why this was so—was it his gun we feared? Only much later did I come to understand that somehow, from deep within ourselves, we had unanimously chosen to refuse to validate his delusions—the conviction that his *Herrenvolk*, his Master Race, had succeeded in completely dehumanizing the children of the Hebrew Bible. [SW, 40]

The choice not to respond is an active gesture of moral resistance. It is unanimous and seems almost instinctive. Only with the passage of time does Rosenberg come to see the full meaning of this collective act, and to see how deeply physical survival can depend upon the survival of the soul, and how wise even the judgment of the wretched can be. This vignette is entitled ‘Pyrrhic Victors’. The one that follows, ‘The Prophetic Flame’, recalls a deed as noble as the guard’s is debased. After many days of starvation the prisoners cry out for bread and water as their cattle-train pulls into a station in western Bohemia:

> I recall a little woman running towards our wagon with two huge loaves of bread, and a guard warning her: ‘One more step and I’ll shoot.’ When she pointed to the wedding-ring on her finger, he told her to come forward. But she just took off the ring and placed it on a stone lying on the ground where she stood. ‘Come and get it,’ she shouted, ‘while I deliver the bread.’ [SW, 41]
This is the Righteous Gentile, a figure who appears in a significant number of Holocaust autobiographies. In this black world a deed such as this is luminous and carries inestimable weight. It has a beauty akin to that of art, and perhaps only art can do it justice. To refuse to be an accomplice to degradation is to refuse to surrender one’s inner freedom. It is to keep alight what Rosenberg calls ‘the eternal flame of human decency’.222

As I have argued elsewhere,223 decency is a central but often undervalued moral virtue. It is less spectacular than the so-called ‘heroic’ virtues like courage; less intense than the romantic passions. But it has the mildness and dependability of what Hume called ‘the calm passions’,224 and it has a special kind of impersonality. This is not impersonality in the sense of uncaring detachment; rather, a decent person will extend to all others the assumption that they warrant and will reciprocate respect. It is what is sometimes termed a ‘civic virtue’.225 Jacob Rosenberg is a passionate man who writes passionate books; yet their after-effect is a surprising calm. When he writes that ‘my friend Mendl and his siblings had already managed to replant, in remotest Melbourne, the warmth and decency of their parents’ home’ [SW, 123], he pays tribute to the ideal of decency that runs so deep in Australian culture, and to its equivalent in the eastern European Jewish world of his childhood. To be decent is to be a mensch, to practise what the Nazis tried to annihilate in Auschwitz, that ‘graveyard of human decency’.

These books seem so deeply to care—for those who perished, for those who survived, and for readers who have inherited the post-Holocaust world. We owe this quality to Rosenberg’s subdued but affectionate tone and to the moral perspective from which he speaks. It also springs, I think, from his profound belief in the light, and in art’s capacity to find its way out of darkness. The memoirist in his eighties is heir to the youth who, decades earlier, ‘in a dark ghetto basement’, felt a mysterious stirring of hope as he beheld ‘a green plant climbing a wet wall towards a tenuous crevice of sun.’ [EOT, 30]