The problem of comparative victimization and the issues associated with the hierarchizing of genocide into greater and “lesser evils” are thoroughly charged, overdetermined, and, for some, even a tasteless enterprise. How does one presume to grade evils? Perhaps a further source of disquiet arises from a powerful claim made by Martin Malia: “Nazism’s unique status as ‘absolute evil,’” he writes, “is now so entrenched that any comparison with it easily appears suspect.” 1 One may (or may not) find such entrenchment normatively problematic or unwarranted, but few, I think, would question the empirical accuracy of Malia’s assertion that Nazism has indeed come to occupy a unique demonic status within our moral economy, a symbol of the deepest incarnation of barbarism and inhumanity. Perhaps Malia should have added an important rider to this statement: the model of Nazism as radical evil applies peculiarly and particularly to Anglo-American spheres of influence and to Western and Central Europe societies (and to some variable and increasing degree, to certain Eastern European countries).

To be sure, September 11 and the putative “clash of civilizations” added a possibly erosive or displacing element to this paradigm—an issue to which we shall return later—but even prior to the bombing of the Twin Towers, this privileged position had increasingly come under attack on a number of fronts and from a variety of more or less persuasive perspectives. 2 These contestations did not go without effect. There is by now broad agreement that such a paradigmatic emplacement (especially concerning the Holocaust’s putative radical incommensurability) has all too often been accompanied by a variety of crude instrumentalizations and vacuous, ideologically motivated “lesson-drawing,” often of an internally contradictory kind. But these exposés are far better at undermining the paradigm than they are in accounting for its initial emergence and later persistence. To argue, as has Peter Novick in his otherwise insightful work, that this figuration is above all a matter of strategic decisions and choices taken by American Jewish communal leaders who, from the 1970s on, discovered a “workable” identity-strengthening commodity in an age of waning Jewish identification, is surely not to take the phenomenon sufficiently seriously. Its far-flung flowering over the last few decades, well
beyond the boundaries of the United States and in societies where the Jewish presence is negligible, suggests that the roots go deeper than this and that the required explanation be a little more rounded. Not all commodities “work” (as Saul Friedländer somewhere pointed out). Something in the event itself, its state-sanctioned criminality, its taboo-breaking aims, its industrial methods and mammoth, transgressive scale clearly rendered such an absolutizing discourse both possible and plausible.

Yet, on its own, this cannot fully account for the centrality of Nazism and the Holocaust within European and American discourse. Perceptual and normative hierarchies are seldom unmediated; representations are not built exclusively upon purely immanent or “objective” considerations. In this paper I want to explore another important though insufficiently remarked and rather subliminal component of this figuration. That it will prove to be both psychologically ambiguous and ethically problematic should come as no surprise.

What, at least in Western consciousness, is the “something” that lifts this case above others? For Michael André Bernstein, the Shoah has become what he calls “the decisive evidentiary event” not simply as a result of its extremity (there are, after all, many other examples of extreme human cruelty) but because of our need for a “monotheistic ideology of catastrophe,” for a single “exemplary model of the darkness at the heart of the modern world” and because of the Holocaust’s singular “figural plasticity,” its amenability “to almost every imaginable, ideological, philosophical and moral construction.” For Tony Judt, the Holocaust has attained its iconic stature “because it captures succinctly and forcibly, at the end of our terrible century, something for which we lack a modern vocabulary, but which lies at the heart of our recent past and thus our present inheritance. That something is the idea of evil.”

But, to some extent, these accounts, while on their own merits quite correct, beg the main question. We need still to probe into what within Western sensibility has, particularly and concretely, allowed Nazism and the Shoah to perform this exemplary and incarnatory role. Judt, indeed, does provide a hint when he writes that: “The Holocaust is not an irreplaceable reminder of human nastiness; for such knowledge we can look in many places. But it is a rather distinctive reminder—or a distinctive warning—of what happens when the patina cracks . . . civil society, public life, open political systems, and the forms of behavior they encourage and on which they depend, are all paper-thin constructions. They are all more fragile than it suits us to believe.”

This insight—that the special scandal resides in the fact that it is our own, recognizably civil society that is implicated—gets us an important part of the way. But it is only part of the way. I want to suggest another delicate dimension of this emplacement. The special, enduring fascination with National Socialism and the atrocities it committed; the very deep drive to account for its horrors and transgressions far greater than that of the Gulag, or Cambodia,