

“The crow on the crematorium chimney”: Germany, Summer 1945

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IN THE HALF-CENTURY SINCE THE END OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR our sense of its moral economy has begun to change. It has always been easy to dismiss Nazism, Fascism, and Japanese imperialism as morally bankrupt. The conduct of the Axis powers has received intensive scrutiny and been established as the contrary moral reference point, as against Allied virtue, in the familiar Anglo-American narrative about the War. But in recent years, the issues raised by the conduct of all sides have complicated the historical accounting of the war even in the victorious West. This new attentiveness has also begun to disclose the place of the war and its aftermath in the philosophical evolution of modernity (see, for example, Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* and Emil L. Fackenheim, “The Holocaust and Philosophy”). The morality of using the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki has entered public discourse not only in terms of military strategy, but in ethical terms as well.¹ The same re-consideration of the Allied strategic bombing offensive against weakly

1 I have in mind works like the *The Day Man Lost* (1981), Petalco (1985), Mandel (1986), Crane (1993), *Hiroshima ...* (1996), Garrett (1993 and 1996), and Hoyt (2000) to name a few.

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defended German cities in the European theatre has begun to change our views of the morality of Allied tactics. Air Vice-Marshal Arthur “Bomber” Harris, the British commander of the Allied air assault on Germany, has been the flashpoint of a heated debate (see, for example, “Death by Moonlight”). German historian Jörg Friedrich has ignited an even more heated controversy with a book on the air war from the German perspective. *Der Brand* has upset Anglo-American readers, not because it emphasizes the devastation wrought on urban Germany by the Allies, but by his use of the language in German normally reserved for writing about the Holocaust, but applied now to Hitler’s “willing executioners” (Goldhagen 1996) recast in the role of victims of Allied barbarity.

Of course most people at the end of the war were not particularly concerned with the politics of a nuanced moral accounting of the victor’s conduct. That good had triumphed over evil was, for the most part, a satisfactory ethical lesson. The public narrative promoted by the victor’s publicists had reduced the matter of “our” values and “theirs” to the lowest common denominator of moral calculation. However, there were voices in the immediate aftermath whose responses to the situation at the end of the fighting were rather more complex and, if I may be permitted to say so, rather more profound, than the conventional ethical complacencies mouthed by the Allies. But these more perceptive responses were very quickly silenced. Well, not exactly “silenced,” if we mean by the word some form of external censorship. These responses were, to put it more accurately, very quickly *unfocussed*, not by any official disapproval, but by a personal process of philosophical self-censoring, a kind of internal repression of “truths” that a liberal, humanist intelligence found too difficult to endure. The unacceptability of raising questions about “our” values in the general stir of victory was perhaps partially responsible for the philosophical retreat, for the unfocussing of the hard truths glimpsed by these moralists. But I don’t think this is the whole story. The withdrawal into the familiar terrain of conventional moral discourse had in the end nothing really to do with the war at all. The war was only the signpost on the road to a more inhospitable moral geography, one that we have come to inhabit ourselves in postmodernity. Elizabeth Bowen put it well in her war time novel, *The Heat of the Day* (1949) when she has one of her characters say that “War, if you come to think of it, hasn’t started anything that wasn’t there already” (33). The human prospect at the end of the war opened paths into unexpected moral and philosophical perplexities that shook those few who were able to see past the moral triumphalism of the victors.

In the summer of 1945, a number of British writers—W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, James Stern—visited Germany in a variety of official capacities. Each of them recorded their experiences and impressions of the situation in the country; each of them was particularly interested in the moral and intellectual damage done by twelve years of Nazi rule, by six years of war, and by the descent into the barbarism of the final solution. Both Spender and Stern published prose accounts of their experiences in Germany: Spender, a prose travel book, *European Witness* (1948), and Stern, *The Hidden Damage* (1947). W.H. Auden, who was there with Stern on assignment with the United States Strategic Bombing Survey, composed two important poems, “Memorial for the City” (June 1949) and “The Shield of Achilles” (1952) as direct responses to his experiences in the first summer of peace.

Involvement of intellectuals in the immediate aftermath of war was not limited to these three individuals of course. It included T.S. Eliot, who was permitted, as one of the first activities of de-Nazification, to broadcast to what was left of the German intelligentsia. His three radio talks in 1945 were published in Berlin in 1946 as *Die Einheit der Europaeischen Kultur* (*The Unity of European Culture*, reprinted later as an appendix to Eliot’s *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, 1948) and dealt with the problem of European cultural unity from the perspective of a ruined Germany in need of spiritual rehabilitation. The visitors also included the diplomat and literary mandarin Harold Nicolson who visited Germany and published a number of essays on what he found there in the late 1940s, including his reflections as an observer at the Nuremberg trials (*Comments, 1944–1948*, 1948).

Each of these texts defines a crucial paradox at the heart of European culture which the moral and material ruin of Germany had made unavoidably visible. The notion, normally well hidden behind a canopy of ethical and juridical forms, that all values—what Spender in his book calls the “tradition”—are in truth inevitably subordinated to unrestrained, value-less, brute “power.” This truth was now in plain view in every corner of the wrecked nation. All of these writers, their comfortable English humanism under attack, were appalled by this realization. Indeed the programmatic virtue in which the Allies wrapped themselves during the war against the Nazis was itself brought into question, not because the Allies didn’t mean what they said about their democratic and humanistic values, but what they said seemed beside the point, largely irrelevant.

The war, according to the Allied leadership and their publicists, had been fought to ensure the survival of civilized values against a demonic and

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power-mad enemy. Democracy, the rule of law, the rights and obligations of responsible citizenship, humanism, reason, and so forth, were values that carried an unquestioned authority in general, but especially in the propaganda war against the Nazis. They were the values for which “we” fought, suffered, and died. Their strength and supremacy in the contest of ideologies could not be gainsaid. Finally, in this public narrative, Germany’s defeat comprised the necessary proof of our moral superiority.

The spectacle of a ruined Germany, however, had a profoundly different effect on these British visitors, an effect they could not have anticipated. Certainly, all of them arrived in Germany with a sense that the retribution inflicted on the Germans was on the whole justified, that the Germans had brought these punishments on themselves. This was a belief they never lost. What *did* change was the apprehension that what lay before them in the ruins was not only a human tragedy (which was to be expected), but a philosophical crisis as well.

The shock of the death camps, the charred and blasted stones of the wrecked nation were heard to be saying something that caught all of these reasonable, tolerant, generous liberals unawares. Beneath all professions of moral principle lay an unplumbed emptiness, an abyss of moral nihilism into which the Nazis *and* the Allies had all been swept. No matter how noble or pure one’s intentions, this was a moral vacuum that, in the summer of 1945, could no longer be hidden from view, no matter how many lectures on the greatness and solidity of the European heritage the BBC broadcast to the supine Germans. The waves of British and American bombers had done more than help defeat the common enemy; they had inadvertently ripped away the ideological covering that under normal circumstances hides the moral vacuum at the centre of existence from our eyes. And as a result the course of history was laid bare as the domain, not of justice, or progress, or of the hidden work of God, or of proper retribution, but, in Nietzsche’s prescient formulation, of the annihilation of all values, even the highest. It is perhaps this very “truth” which informs George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, also a text of the aftermath. Richard Rorty certainly thinks so. In his superb essay on Orwell and cruelty, Rorty hears the novel saying “that there is nothing deep inside each of us, no common human nature, no built-in human solidarity, to use as a moral reference point” (177).

For those sustained by a deep religious faith, the nihilism I am invoking may be more psychological than philosophical. It may only be the experience of emotional emptiness and disappointment in learning to bear a greater weight of human malice than one imagined possible before

Auschwitz or Dresden. The revelations of the war may have changed the faithful emotionally and psychologically, but, it could be argued, they have not been shaken philosophically. For them, the worst that can be imagined affirms, no doubt, what is already suspected or believed about the human potential for wickedness. If one is made in sin, the degree of sinfulness becomes a problem in the spiritual arithmetic of damnation. But for those made otherwise, having connected their spiritual well being to the human world, to ideas and values that have evolved from human experience, to the material structures that sustain human communities, and even to the biological framework of life, the crisis provoked by the barbarisms of the Second World War descends more deeply and fatefully into human consciousness. And, there, it passes beyond the momentary loss of confidence into the primordial structures of existence. It is in the work of a Paul Celan, for example, or the later poetry of Sylvia Plath, that the poetic reaching into the abyss plumbs philosophical depths beyond the reach of psychology.

The unimaginable horrors of the death camps and the devastation of the German cities revealed, for all to see, a radical nihilism at the core of existence that could not be avoided, a nihilism that Martin Heidegger had come to believe comprised the very law of history (*Nietzsche* IV, 53). Nicolas Nabokov who was with Auden at Bad Homburg during part of the summer recalled Auden's shock "at the spectacle of the desolation of German cities."

"I know that they had *asked* for it," [Auden] would say, "but still, this kind of total destruction is beyond reasoning.... It seems like madness! ... It is absolutely ghastly."

He did not like those "obtuse Krauts," as he called Germans at this time of life, "but still, Nicky, is it justified to reply to *their* mass-murder by *our* mass-murder? It seems terrifying to me...." (Nabokov 145)

Nabokov does not tell us what precisely terrified Auden about it, but it is not much of a stretch to assume that he was troubled by how the Allied actions had cut the ground from beneath their own professions of moral rectitude, in the same way that the use of former Nazi officials by the administrators of the Occupation had already begun to bring down the Allies from the moral high ground. It might be worth noting that Auden's perplexity was not only limited to those who saw the devastation first hand. A good deal of the literature and philosophy of the 1940s in general (Orwell, for example) attempts to come to grips with the unexpected and unavoidable 'truth' of this situation.

In *European Witness*, Stephen Spender is conscious that this philosophical truth constitutes a kind of unspoken and unconscious sub-text of the conduct and words of the Germans he meets. It is a truth they already seem to know without knowing. They seem to have known it for some time, but especially during the sway of the Third Reich (Spender 28–9 and cf. Martin Heidegger’s lectures on Nietzsche in the 1930s and his lecture on Rilke in 1946). Now, however, the Allies, or at least the Allied intellectuals in Germany in that first summer of peace, had come to realize the same thing with the full force of an indisputable revelation.

The city is dead and the inhabitants only haunt the cellars and basements. Without their city they are rats in the cellars, or bats wheeling around the towers of the cathedral. The citizens go on existing with a mechanical kind of life like that of insects in the crannies of walls who are too creepy and ignoble to be destroyed when the wall is torn down. The destruction of the city itself, with all its past as well as its present, is like a reproach to the people who go on living there. The sermons in the stones of Germany preach nihilism. (Spender 24)

Later as he contemplates the departed figures of the Nazi leadership, Hitler and Goebbels and the others, Spender is struck by the fact that their passing has not brightened a darkened world; indeed it seems to have had the opposite effect.

The whole world had seemed to be darkened with their darkness, and when they left the world, the threat of a still greater darkness, a total and everlasting one, rose up from their ashes. (Spender 241)

The notion that the Nazis have torn a gaping hole in the illusions of the civilized, a tear that can never be mended, and that, as a result, a horror that is even more chilling than Hitler’s deeds has spread across the whole of civilized life was expressed also by T. S. Eliot to the Italian intellectual Emilio Cecchi in 1947 in a conversation about the death camps and the holocaust.

Eliot wondered whether the gates of such hells, in the spiritual and material order, can readily be considered to be closed for ever. Or whether mankind, now capable of reaching extremes of frightfulness, has a weaker resistance to new and infernal suggestions; whether the wheel of bloodshed can stop at last or will follow its murderous course. These things were said lightly so as in some way to mitigate their frightfulness. But

I felt that with the man I was speaking to, as with myself, the dread was almost stronger than the hope. (March and Tam-bimuttu 75–6)

Eliot's post-war radio talks to the Germans address the possibility of convalescence against this background of dread; they speak directly to the actions necessary for the recovery of a squandered virtue.

Spender's text voices the same qualms expressed by Cecchi and he is beset now and then by intense feelings of hopelessness, depression, and nausea, indeed one of the most powerful chapters in *European Witness* carries the title "Nausea." By the word, Spender is no doubt trying to convey some of the philosophical meanings of Jean-Paul Sartre's use of the term "la nausée" in the novel of that name and of Albert Camus's contemporaneous exploration of nihilism in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Spender's nausea is a psychological and physical sensation, the vertigo that results from the realization that the material ruin of Germany was the visible embodiment of a more general condition, a condition from which the victors themselves had not been able to escape.

My depression was caused by the sense not just of a temporary condition around me in Germany which could be remedied by programmes of Reconstruction, but by the realization of a real potentiality in my environment.... This was the potentiality of the ruin of Germany to become the ruin of the whole of Europe: of the people of Brussels and Paris, London and New York, to become herds wandering in their thousands across a continent, reduced to eating scraps and roots and grass. It was the sense as I walked along the streets of Bonn with a wind blowing putrescent dust of ruins as stinking as pepper into my nostrils, that the whole of our civilization was protected by such eggshell walls which could be blown down in a day. (Spender 67–8)

I think it safe to say that this passage in *European Witness* represents the nadir of Spender's experiences. In counterpoint, Spender does try to find resources of hope that might help in dispelling the dark vision. These are not so much positive signs that all is not as bleak as it seems, but possible courses of action that might be taken by people of good will to transform the situation. These possibilities are unnervingly rather vague. The "only answer," he writes in conclusion, "is a conscious, deliberate and wholly responsible determination to make our society walk in the paths of light" (241). One might wish for slightly more solid assurances in the face of the encompassing devastation. The imbalance between the picture of darkness

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Spender spends so many pages painting and this faint glimmer of hope is perhaps the most telling particular of the politics of the book's form.

All the British intellectuals who visited Germany in that first summer of peace seem to have suffered from the same malady as Spender to a greater or lesser extent. Even the aging diplomat Harold Nicolson, more comfortably settled in an imperturbable British liberalism, armed with a sense that at the end of the day all could be put right with the world after the application of a healthy portion of common sense, British fair play and justice, was not entirely immune from Spender's malaise (*Comments* 80). Certainly Eliot and Stern and Auden were profoundly shaken by their experiences. Yet their texts, as they record the horrific "truth" of their experience, are already at work to repress the knowledge in the very moment in which they make it visible.

I am particularly interested in the two poems by Auden which I mentioned at the beginning and which were written as a result of his travels in Germany in the first summer of peace. "Memorial for the City" and "The Shield of Achilles" are generally considered two of his most important poems in the second half of his career. I am especially interested in them because they show better than any of the prose texts the mechanism by which a difficult philosophical impasse might be rhetorically contained and mastered. It cannot be made to go away, nor refuted, but it can, as I said before, be unfocused. Auden's poems show us, if we must, how to avert our eyes.

Incidentally, I mentioned a moment ago that these poems come in the second half of Auden's career. This notion of a career divided into two parts is important for Auden and Spender. Both of them, as is well known, were initially shaped by the political idealisms of the 1930s and they were both associated with various left wing causes, Spender going so far as to declare himself a communist and to join the Communist Party of Great Britain for a few weeks in the mid-'30s. As was the case with so many left intellectuals in that time, the Spanish Civil War marked the beginning of the end of their youthful political commitments. Auden, after his short visit to Spain, withdrew increasingly into the small "I" liberal humanism of his class (and one might add the programmatic liberalism that became the prevailing socio-political orthodoxy of the Cold War period). In his poetry, he began to cultivate a kind of civic-minded aestheticism, one in which he was able to say, in a tone of exhausted relief, after the delirium of the 1930s, that "Poetry makes nothing happen." And this in 1940, in a poem commemorating the death of W. B. Yeats, an artist who would have been startled to hear such a low opinion of poetry's potency linked

to praise of his achievements. Spender underwent a similar transformation, well-documented in that autobiographical exercise in self-renovation called *World Within World* (1951).

Spender's reactions to his visit to Germany were not explicitly recorded in poems. His poems after the 1930s shrank from activist engagements with the public sphere into the intense scrutiny of private matters, personal relationships, love, desire, the secrets of one's own dreamlife. I have argued elsewhere that the self-absorbed mysticism of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* had made this sort of withdrawal very fashionable among many former radicals carefully migrating from the embarrassing commitments of the 1930s to sober reliability as the witch hunting years got under way in the West.

Auden's commitments had also changed in the early 1940s with his public profession of Christian belief and his public adherence to an Episcopalian/Anglican piety. Yet even this "solution" to the question of ultimate values in a destitute time could not temper the psychological impact of seeing Germany in ruins. Auden was in Germany from May to September. He was there as a civilian research chief in the Morale Division of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, holding the honorary or simulated rank of Major in the U.S. Army. This is not the place to go into the fascinating history of the USSBS (the "Usbussters"), but it is perhaps useful to know that a large number of individuals who would later come to play important roles in the public life of the West were involved in the work of the Survey: Paul Nitze, George Ball, Kenneth Galbraith, Paul Baran, are perhaps the most famous.²

Auden offered his services in the Spring of 1945 and was immediately accepted as a participant. His assignment was to help with the study of the psychological effects of bombing on the civilian population in Germany and the production of a report for the Department of Defence. Auden was eager to go to Germany to see for himself what had happened to a country he had come to know well at the height of the Weimar period. He was not entirely prepared for what he found there on that wasted landscape. In a letter to Tania Stern (James's wife) from Darmstadt, Auden wrote,

2 Perhaps the most important literary use of the reports of the USSBS relates to the background information which informs Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1969). A reading of the reports and some of the contemporary responses to the Survey in the U.S. press (especially Drew Pearson) show that a good deal of Pynchon's information about the end of the war in Europe is drawn from them.

The town outside of which we live was ninety-two per cent destroyed in thirty minutes [of bombing]. You can't imagine what that looks like unless you see it with your own eyes. (Osborne 219)

Indeed it was an “unreal world” of ruin that Auden and other members of the Field Teams in the Survey encountered. Naval Commander S. Paul Johnston, former editor of the journal *Aviation*, writing to Survey administrator T. P. Wright described the situation in Kassel, two weeks after the capitulation.

Kassel was a complete wreck. Until you have seen one of these ruined cities you cannot really believe what they are like. In all of the central part of Kassel there did not appear to be a single habitable dwelling or other building. The place is simply a mass of rubble. Where the people are living is beyond me except that we did see quite a few who were apparently existing in the cellars. (MacIsaac 88)

Furthermore, in scenes reminiscent of the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch, “bands of marauding DP's [displaced persons] released from forced labour or concentration camps swarmed over the countryside. Desperate for food, determined for revenge, and fired by liquor, they descended on villages, plundering, raping, and killing” (MacIsaac 86). In Berlin, a field team of the Survey in search of German documents reported that the administrative centre of the city was “an utter shambles.”

(Thursday, 19 July [1945]) ... The Tiergarten looks like a no man's land. Its trees have been stripped of all but the largest branches, and are leafing from the trunks. As elsewhere in the city the grass plots now contain the bodies of many Russian and German soldiers who fell in the street fighting. Perhaps more grotesque than anything are the remains of Berlin's statuary, of which there was a plethora; horses without their former riders, figures without heads or limbs.

Or the following Boschian description from the same report:

(Sunday, 22 July) In the late afternoon a savage windstorm sprang up, lifting half the dust and rubble of the city and distributing it around indiscriminately. The remaining pieces of glass in windowless Berlin were flying through the air; documents and papers which had been tossed outside in an effort to clean up buildings soared heavenwards; the walls of some gutted buildings collapsed; the atmosphere was opaque. Later in the evening the wind died, in order to give the mosquitoes,

breeding in the stagnant canals and static water pools, a chance to come out for their usual night life, while the team observed the ten-thirty curfew. (MacIsaac 93)

It is precisely his personal experiences of the German cities in ruins, with all their post-apocalyptic resonances, that gives Auden's poems not only their forceful realism, but their symbolic suggestiveness as well.

However, we are not dealing here with works that are limited to a kind of documentary realism. They also apprehend a deeper crisis of belief and meaning.

Across the square,
Between the burnt-out Law Courts and Police Headquarters,
Past the Cathedral far too damaged to repair,
Around the Grand Hotel patched up to hold reporters.
Near huts of some Emergency Committee,
The barbed wire runs through the abolished City. (*CSP* 292)

The irony of the Grand Hotel having been patched up first in order to hold reporters, while the Cathedral, clearly a building of low priority in the reconstruction plans of the victors, is perhaps too obvious to mention. More to the point, though, is his image of "barbed wire" which symbolizes, it seems to me, the philosophical dilemma I have tried to describe above. The wire runs through and exhausts all aspects of existence.

Across the plains,
Between two hills, two villages, two trees, two friends,
The barbed wire runs which neither argues nor explains
But, where it likes, a place, a path, a railroad ends,
The humour, the cuisine, the rites, the taste,
The pattern of the City, are erased.

The reference to its brusque nonchalance ("neither argues nor explains") and to its annihilation of all those settled forms of life that make the discernments of civilization possible underlines its place in the poem as the emblem of nihilism. The wire, the poem tells us, runs through our psyches as well, our dreams, our desires, even our sexuality, tipped now towards sado-masochism ("It ties the smiler to the double bed").

In "The Shield of Achilles," the barbed wire returns as the circumference of a place where "three pale figures" are bound "To three posts driven upright in the ground" and there executed (*CSP* 295). The effect is to obliterate the civilizing discriminations, to reduce the "mass and majesty of this world" to its zero degree of significance. In its place we are given

in conclusion an emblematic composite scene drawn from the experience of his journeys across Germany.

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,
Loitered about that vacancy, a bird
Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:
That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
Were axioms to him, who'd never heard
Of any world where promises are kept,
Or one could weep because another wept. (CSP 295)

It is these scenes of material and moral devastation that comprise the poem's historical vision. Against the ghastly implications of the landscapes of ruin, Auden in a confusing and even incoherent way, sets a series of countercurrents which are meant, I presume, to soothe the sting of this dreadful vision of the human world. Early in "Memorial for the City" we are offered for a moment the remaining remnants of a defunct aestheticism.

... for ever and ever
Plum-blossom falls on the dead, the roar of the waterfall covers
The cries of the whipped ... (CSP 289)

But this will clearly not do. The moral neutrality of the aesthetic brings us to the wider impasse that Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" only partially discerned in personal terms. In Keats's veneration of beauty, the Urn raises us to a new height of sensible response, only making mock, after the poem's turn at "Cold Pastoral," by reminding us of our mortality and, yet, leaving the Urn's beauty intact and unassailable. Auden's "Plum-blossoms" simply fall on the dead while the waterfall suppresses the voices of the victims of torture. Having dismissed the egotistical sublime, "Memorial for the City" shifts to a different programme of moral pacification.

From the easy perspective of his new religious affiliations, Auden is able to re-assure his readers "that there is reason for what we bear,"

That our hurt is not a desertion, that we are to pity
Neither ourselves nor our city;
Whoever the searchlights catch, whatever the loudspeakers blare,
We are not to despair. (CSP 290)

I agree with John R. Boly in considering this summoning of Christian consolation "as a matter of propriety" (183), as a matter of playing it safe with readers who might not be ready to accept the proposition that "our past is a chaos of graves and the barbed-wire stretches ahead / Into our

future till it is lost to sight” (289–90).³ Boly goes on to say the Christian gestures in the poem can be protectively deployed with a “minimum of effort.” An epigraph from the then fashionable Juliana of Norwich,⁴ a few biblical allusions (to Adam, the Cross, the Last Judgment) will suffice. The “three pale figures” bound to stakes and summarily executed in “The Shield of Achilles” may refer to Christ’s crucifixion but rather than emphasizing the redemptive possibilities of Christ’s death in the presence of the two thieves, Auden’s figures are indistinguishable one from the other. When the Evangelists tell the story of Christ’s death, they are careful to discriminate among the crucified. Christ and the thieves are not all the same. In Auden’s poem, the pale figures are lumped together as simple victims of a ruthless indifference. Any movement towards Christian comfort dies with their nameless extermination.

There are other tensions in the poem between the difficult vision of nihilism in contemporary history and the consolation to be derived from the highest values. However, there is one aspect of the rhetoric of both poems which locates this tension not only in the poems’s explicit meanings, but also in their form and structure. I am referring to the matter of the point of view or perspective in the poems. In many ways, this technical matter is a much more reliable path to a poem’s innermost values than its explicit declarations of belief. The moral or human status of the point of view or angle of vision is the key. Christopher Isherwood’s *I Am a Camera*, the American title of his *The Berlin Stories*, is our moral guide here.

“Memorial for the City” begins with the eyes of the crow and the camera opening “Onto Homer’s world” (289), namely the battlefield at Troy, and a vision of the gods coldly indifferent to the sufferings of “men.” The eyes of the crow (perched on a crematorium chimney) and the blank eye of a camera dehumanize the perspective and, as a result, work the poem free of any draw in the human affections.⁵ Crow and camera are alien to the human province. The use of the first person in the final section of the poem only underlines the alienation effects. We do not hear a persona speaking in section four, but a psychological abstraction he calls rather

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3 Winston Smith, in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948), imagines a very similar end of history, a jackboot stamping endlessly on your face.

4 Juliana had been invoked by T. S. Eliot in the concluding section of his “Little Gidding” (1942), the fourth poem in *Four Quartets* (1944).

5 In “The Fall of Rome” (1948), Auden also uses the images of animals, “Little birds” and “Herds of reindeer,” as points of view that alienate completely the human world, a world seen from cross-species perspective as distant, fragile and supine.

gnomically “Our Weakness” (292–3). Similarly the two perspectives of “The Shield of Achilles,” the documentary detachment in the representation of contemporary landscapes and the evocation of Book XVIII of the *Iliad* (the making of the shield by Hephaestus at the urging of Thetis), distances that poem twice over. And in this later, perhaps tougher, text, Auden does not even feel it necessary to allay the anxious mood with the bromide of Christian solace.

Finally, in “Memorial for the City,” in addition to the telling perspectives of crow and camera, we also have the perspective of the historian (a more familiar kind of distanced, detached, even candid observer). The poet as historian figures the cultural history of Europe in section two of “Memorial for the City” as successive images of the City. Certainly the City is the great arena of European history. But that is not what is most significant about this section of the text. The choice of successiveness as the formal trope for the movement of history is itself an important aspect of the philosophical politics of the text. The presentation of historical time as mere sequence disavows and abandons the notion of history as evolutionary or progressive, as a progress that is informed by values or ideas or both. The value-laden meanings of the words progressive or progress are silently obliterated by the vision of Europe culminating as the place of ruins of Section III. Employing successiveness as the rhetorical map of this part of the poem abrades our expectations of a narrative coherence and meaningfulness to history, a narrative that is leading us somewhere, that has some expected end. In the poem, it leads, of course, to the present time and the barbed wire. But the sense that somewhere in the future a resurrection is possible that will redeem a destitute time is left unspoken in the poem’s *form*, though the Christian affirmation earlier may console the reader who finds this vision of history intolerable.

This moment of candour in the discussion about the philosophical implications of the experience and events of war did not last very long. The coming of the Cold War after 1947 effectively “disappeared” Auden’s “truth” from view. It camouflaged the abyss with the new discourses of demonization, moral self-congratulation and piety which accompanied the new cycle of power politics between East and West. However, in that first summer of peace what would become an important theme in post-modernity was visible, for an instant, for all who had eyes to see.

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