

KATHY PHILLIPS

Mass Nakedness in the Imaginary of the Nazis

In *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi vividly records the relentless attempts by the SS to dehumanize through nudity. When his group of ninety-six Italian men have been separated from the women and sent to Monowitz, near Auschwitz, guards greet them with blows, insults, and the demand to undress. Not only do the prisoners lose their own familiar clothes, but each loses his personalizing hair to the shavers. In a series of lunatic details, a functionary next sweeps the ninety-six pairs of shoes together to unmatch them. Then, overseers herd the prisoners into boiling showers, drive them into a freezing room, and finally toss each one a stranger's clothes. Before being allowed to dress, however, the prisoners must run naked, clutching the bundles, for a hundred yards to the next hut, in icy snow (22-26). Levi flatly sums up this madhouse as "the demolition of a man" (26).

By questioning the place of mass nakedness in the Lager system (Levi's term for the concentration camps and slave labor camps), I am not searching out individual psychologies of perpetrators such as Rudolf Höss, Adolph Eichmann, and Franz Stangl. Rather, I am using their testimony and the writings of survivors to look further into links between what George Steiner calls "the structures of the inhuman" and the "contemporary matrix of high civilization" (29). As his lecture series *In Bluebeard's Castle* trenchantly asked more than forty years ago, why weren't "humanistic traditions" more of a "barrier against political bestiality," and, even more provocatively, could those very traditions perhaps have carried "express solicitations of authoritarian rule and cruelty" (30)? Steiner speculates that an important social contributor to cruelty can be found in the "messianic religions": Judaism, Christianity (and, for him, Marxism) (43). I follow Steiner in finding

harmful effects in religion, but I shift from the ideas he blames to focus instead on a religious devaluation of the body: fear of, contempt for, and compensating preoccupation with its nakedness, its sexuality, and embodiment itself.

The Nazi policy of mass strippings had as its often conscious aim to erase identity, humiliate, make victims feel weak and defenseless, and provide perpetrators with both disgust and sexual titillation. To these purposes, I am emphasizing two additional sources of meaning from the cultural “imaginary,” that is, socially made-up assumptions. The first source resides in gender definitions, as perpetrators react to victims’ mass nakedness and suffering in a kind of *masculinity test*, to prove (to themselves and superiors) that they can overcome fellow feeling—precisely because pity had been spuriously defined as “feminine.” This “test” occurs within a claimed self-sacrifice that also needs to be explained. The second element in the imaginary comes from Dante’s *Inferno* and Last Judgment paintings. These works, mentioned by devisors of the camps and by survivors, coded nakedness as *the very sign of evil*.¹ In Last Judgment paintings, everyone emerges naked from the tombs, but angels quickly robe the “good,” whereas the damned stay bare. Just by looking at them, a viewer “knows” they are “evil.”

Steiner shrewdly calls the Nazi death camps “the deliberate enactment of a long precise imagining” of hell, and he designates Dante’s *Inferno* their “literal guidebook” (*Bluebeard* 54-55), but he does not specifically include mass nakedness among his topics. By contrast, two Jewish survivors consciously address Last Judgment training in the acceptability of hell. In the second half of this essay, I will show how Primo Levi, in *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Drowned and the Saved*, alludes to both Dante and Last Judgment teaching at a key moment of insight. Paul Celan, in his poems “Psalm” and “Die Posaunenstelle,” borrows specific elements from Jewish and Christian versions of Last Judgment texts and paintings. Remarkably, both writers are able to analyze or expose dangerous cultural assumptions that accompany these arts. Both also manage to salvage, against all odds—and *within* a scene of mass nakedness—either a human dignity, or a radical revision of the cultural inheritance.

To review briefly the more well-known aims of Nazi policy that forced mass nudity, some survivors emphasize the purposeful theft of individuality that follows from the stealing of not only clothes but also hair. Livia Bitton Jackson testifies that when more than a thousand women are ordered to undress and “several husky girls in gray cloaks begin shaving our hair—on our heads, under the arms, and on the pubic area,” the prisoners blur into a “monolithic mass. Inconsequential” (Rittner

and Roth 78-79). The guards, tuning into a medieval assumption that assumes women more “lascivious” than men, take the cue of “immodest” undress to taunt “blöde Lumpen, idiotic whores,” until their epithets further degenerate into “blöde Schweine, idiotic swine,” and “blöde Hunde, idiotic dogs”: “easier to despise . . . easier to handle,” as Jackson interprets (79).² Sybil Milton similarly recalls that shavings done by other coerced prisoners, men or women, enforced a “loss of identity,” compounded by colored triangles and tattooed numbers to supersede names (Rittner and Roth 228).

Many survivors also record that “public and collective nudity” tried to make prisoners feel weak and defenseless: “Now a naked and barefoot man feels that all his nerves and tendons are severed: he is helpless prey. He no longer perceives himself as a human being but rather as a worm: naked, slow, ignoble, prone on the ground. He knows that he can be crushed at any moment” (Levi, *Drowned* 113). For women, the threat of sexual attack intensified the fear. Cecilie Klein recounts how police (and neighbors screaming slurs) rounded up Hungarian Jews for transport to the camps, but first subjected them to “degrading body searches.” Men and women were stripped together; then the women and girls “were ordered to lie on our sides on a wooden table. While an SS officer gawked and jeered, a woman with a stick poked around our private parts” (Ofer and Weitzman 330). Rank and file guards may have confined their sexual exploitation to leering rather than raping because of strict penalties for “*Rassenschande*, racial shame”: consorting with “inferior” people. On the other hand, instances of officers taking women away for rape, either returning them battered and incoherent or never returning the murdered, did occur often enough to keep fear of rape present at subsequent strippings (Ofer and Weitzman 289-91, 336).³

Because of this leering undercurrent, an observer at Ravensbrück concluded that SS always associated “cruelty and debauchery” (qtd. in Rittner and Roth 266). Actually, in 1905, psychologist Sigmund Freud had declared that all male sexuality “contains an element of *aggressiveness*—a desire to subjugate” (23). In the face of what he assumes will be women’s resistance to sex, he says he understands why men must take an “active,” even “violent attitude to the sexual object” (24).⁴ However, I do not believe that a link between sex and violence is quite as natural as Freud implies. Instead, sadistic or sado-masochistic versions of sex could develop culturally from religious contempt for the body. Whenever a religion makes people feel wrong just for having desire, or just for existing in a body (often forbidding masturbation, for example, and sometimes without formulating laws against coercive sex), then

sexuality could turn furtive or angry: at oneself, or at the recipient of desire, conveniently transformed into scapegoat for oneself.

Hence, I do follow Steiner in blaming “psychology of religion” as an important contributor to violence, but he differs in discussing self-sacrifice only in connection to ego, not body, and he traces self-sacrifice in Judaism, Christianity (and “messianic socialism”) solely to an “altruistic imperative” (*Bluebeard* 34, 42-43). However, it is very different, philosophically, to say something like “I will sacrifice some of my needs for others because we’re all in this equally,” versus (as often happened in Christianity), “I sacrifice myself, *whether it helps anybody or not*, because my ‘fallen’ body needs to be chastised, just for existing.” Other versions of self-sacrifice that avoid and even reverse altruism include “I hurt myself, to prove I am strong enough to do it,” or “I hurt myself, because God requires blood payment from innocent and guilty alike, and I’ll get in good with God and save me”

For the Nazis, self-sacrifice might be “for” the Führer, to prove a devotion to this highest authority, but even with such a huge shift from divine to human father-figure, self-denial still carried an aura of sacred obligation. For example, Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz, has learned that a Christian is supposed to chastise the flesh and engage in “self-sacrifice,” a trait that he highly praises (145). Among his own self-proclaimed tests, he says over and over that he has to face the terrible trial of witnessing the mass stripping of prisoners followed by entry into the gas chambers. When he first tried out the Zyklon B murder agent and gave the order to undress to a transport of nine hundred Russian political prisoners, he claims he *had to* witness disrobing and gassing, at that time and for all later transports (147). He admits that “Protected by a gas-mask, I watched the killing myself” and insists that “I had to see everything. I had to watch hour after hour, by day and by night I had to look through the peep-hole of the gas-chambers and watch the process of death itself, because the doctors wanted me to see it. I had to do all this because I was the one to whom everyone looked” (146, 154). Höss harps on seeing and being seen, as if the suffering of others were all just a show to him, and as if he himself were a mere figure in a painting.

This visual focus has several possible explanations. He distances himself from the violence, and he excuses himself from the mound of bodies. At the same time, could he be spying on forbidden physicality at his own private peep-show? That Höss may be arranging while at the same time denying some voyeuristic pleasure bears out Dagmar Herzog’s argument that the Nazis were constantly “inciting” and providing sexual benefits—for “approved” people only—while simultaneously “disavowing” sexual goals as the immoral province of Jews, Marxists, and Weimar

“extremists” (18, 28, 37): Thus, when the commandant complains of a burden and sacrifice in watching the mass strippings of Auschwitz, he may be just lying, as he hypocritically hushes up some thrill for himself. Yet one part of this observing does sincerely weigh on him, because of his perceived need to stifle all emotion.

Although outwardly Höss coldly directs one of the worst atrocities of the twentieth century, inwardly a whole range of warm emotions constantly threatens to erupt: enjoyment? horror? guilt? Yet to prove his virtuousness, he needs not only to see, but to be seen seeing *unmoved*. As he frets, “Everyone watched me . . . Every word I said on the subject was discussed. I had to exercise intense self-control in order to prevent my innermost doubts and feelings of oppression from becoming apparent. I had to appear cold and indifferent to events that must have wrung the heart of anyone possessed of human feelings” (153-54). Writing in prison, Höss may to some extent be cadging for sympathy, even after condemnation, or just finessing his own self-approval, but at the same time he conveys a genuine and long-standing anxiety about displaying too much emotion. What could have taught him that feeling is in and of itself sinful?

The main factor that makes him fear emotion is a cultural definition of manliness. Höss remarks that the human butchers around him, even men “who were certainly tough enough, had no wish to exchange places with me,” indicating that he strives to be “toughest” of all (155). In fact, several countries were associating toughness more and more with masculinity; as George Orwell complains in 1939, in England between the world wars, the story of the American “tough guy,” who punches rather than thinks or feels, was invading all the boys’ weeklies (300). For Höss too, “human feelings” have sunk into a “weakness” that would make him a “laughing-stock” (81). A trainer in the SS informs any recruits who might feel “pity” for “enemies of the state” that he has “no room for weaklings in his ranks, and if any man felt that way he should withdraw to a monastery as quickly as possible. Only tough and determined men were of any use to him” (Höss 68). Besides banishing Christianity away from society into its most secluded spot, the monastery, the trainer also insinuates a question of virility between chaste monks and tough men, in the process reinforcing widespread but bizarre links between kindness and a cluster called femininity, weakness, and asexuality (as if men innately had no potential for kindness, and “good” women, no affinity for sex), and between sexual potency and aggression, a link his culture called “masculine” (Phillips, Chapter 1, also 179).

One effect of Höss’s constant panic that he may reveal some supposedly weak and feminine emotion is his interest in a group of Jews called the Special

Detachment; he “watched them closely” (512). The Special Detachment soothingly led newly arrived Jews into the gas chambers of Auschwitz and then hauled corpses out. Höss calls this group a “riddle” and speculates on their possible motives: do they think they’ll curry favor and escape (153)? He can scarcely credit this possible explanation, so clear is it to him that no amount of cooperativeness will relieve anyone, so he goes on to fantasize a ludicrous revenge against other Jews. That the Nazis’ deceptive lure of a reprieve might constitute a particularly vicious mental torment—stealing a collaborator’s self-respect before finally stealing his life—does not preoccupy Höss. Nor does it occur to him that some of the Special Detachment may generously wish to spare others a fearful fore-knowledge. Instead, what fascinates Höss is the ability of this group to *mask* what they know and still continue to act calmly.

In fact, the Special Detachment display none of the human emotion that so terrifies the Commandant. One man discovers the corpse of his own wife, stands still only for a moment, then goes on with his guiding task (152). Höss reacts very ambivalently to such mirror images of his own apparent nonchalance. On the one hand, he condemns the Special Detachment for their lack of “solidarity” with other Jews (151). He could, of course, reproach himself his own, much greater lack of solidarity with fellow humans, but he is practiced in projecting his undesirable traits onto scapegoats. On the other hand, he obviously admires the Special Detachment for their “strength” (152). He watches these outwardly unruffled and cool-headed Jews to learn how not to transgress his own ideal of reputedly masculine coldness.

Even so, at times Höss seems to be rooting for the Special Detachment to erupt in some emotion after all—get angry and rebel! break down and cry for your wife!—precisely so that he too could follow suite. He then approaches his superior officer, Adolf Eichmann, in a similar effort to find a role model who would license his own unbuckling of pent-up feeling. He tries to test out if Eichmann might be secretly horrified by the atrocities, but when his superior only gloats, Höss concludes that he must squelch any hidden stirrings of pity: “after these conversations with Eichmann I almost came to regard such emotions as a betrayal of the Führer. There was no escape for me from this dilemma” (155). There is certainly no escape for his victims. Höss has learned from his culture that to satisfy his deep longing for approval, he must lock himself into a hierarchy of unquestioning obedience, stifle kind emotions defined as womanly, put himself to stringent tests, and surround himself with suffering, not the pleasures of equal, consenting exchange. Claimed

self-sacrifice has now acquired a dual cachet: the sacred obligation of its religious past, and the newer veneer of manly “strength.”⁶

Like Höss, his superior Eichmann has learned that he should test out if he can endure self-sacrifice, withstand pain, and abjure pleasure. Eichmann was thrilled, he said, to enroll in such a “historic, grandiose, unique” fight against “enemies” in and outside the country precisely because this grand task was “difficult to bear” (qtd. in Arendt 339). Observing Germany in 1941, social psychologist Erich Fromm believed that the “highest virtue” under National Socialism was to “suffer without complaining” (172). Eichmann took his at least rhetorical scorn of pleasure to a grotesque extreme when he boasted, at his trial, that the Nazi system purposely tried to “weed out all those who derived physical pleasure from what they did” (339). *He* was not a sadist, Eichmann insisted, just someone who had to constrain himself to a hard task.⁷

But how in the world did Eichmann think that *he* bore heavy burdens? Like Höss, Eichmann claimed he suffered by squeezing and ignoring pity, what he called “animal pity” (Arendt 339) and Höss called “weakness” (68). As Hannah Arendt points out, it wasn’t that Eichmann didn’t *have* feelings; he just never let them interfere with an “idea” (318). Also like Höss, Eichman was constantly checking if he projected a proper masculinity, since not only pity but also “animal” physicality had been relegated to women. Obviously, physicality and sexuality belong to corporeal men too, but several sources in his cultural inheritance taught differently. The Aristotelian notion that men possess all the “spirit” and women, all the “matter” (Lerner 206), as well as the medieval Christian accusation that Eve and her descendants behave more lasciviously than men, lasted into the twentieth century. A German pamphlet from 1900 patronized women’s “lower” nature: “Instinct makes women animal-like, dependent, secure and cheerful” (qtd. in Gay 327). By the years after World War I, as Maria Tatar argues in *Lustmord*, this saccharine condescension toward “animal-like,” dependent womanhood had turned into hostility toward women, played out in a whole cultural fixation on sex murders. Tatar attributes this fascination with rape-murder (in paintings, novels, films, and extensive newspaper coverage of actual cases) not only to soldiers’ resentment that women did not have to fight, but also to traditional Christian attempts to foist off physicality onto women. Most tellingly, a newspaper article comes close to excusing the male serial killers, because all men want to soar toward “spirituality,” but habitually have their “wings clipped” by women, who weigh them down with lowly, disgusting “earth and matter” (qtd. in Tatar 53).

The Nazis then drew on this already available stash of denigrating words that had been used for women to slur Jews (men and women alike) as “feminized,” “sexualized,” “animal-like.” Franz Stangl, for example, who had been commandant at Sobibor camp, associated Jews with cattle-cars, a cattle run, and (in a belatedly guilty moment) with slaughtered cattle on the way to the “tins,” as if people were meat (Sereny 201).

Not only was Stangl stuck in this arbitrary hierarchy borrowed from gender definitions, but he also consciously knew Dante’s *Inferno* as a visual parallel to the camps. When moved from Sobibor to a new command, he described his first glimpse of Treblinka as “the most awful thing I saw during the whole of the Third Reich It was Dante come to life” (Sereny 157). Specifically, the “hundreds, no thousands” of naked corpses lying and stacked everywhere elicited the comparison, as he, like Hoss, took up a spectator’s position. Standing on an earthen wall, he would oversee not “individuals,” but “a mass”: “naked, packed together, running, being driven with whips like—’ the sentence trailed off” (qtd. in Sereny 201). A survivor, also remembering Stangl above the “cattle pen,” fills in, “like Napoleon surveying his domain” (202), but we might also fill in, “like the character Dante.” For example, in Botticelli’s late fifteenth-century illustration for Canto XV (from a whole series housed in Berlin and the Vatican), Dante, in vivid clothing, stations himself on an earthen wall to look down at the naked and running inmates (Clark 43). Just as Stangl seems to be claiming the power of a conqueror, he may also be reassuring himself that—despite his murderous commands—his higher vantage and his clothing (in his case, a distinctive white jacket) separate him from the naked damned and place him, with Dante, automatically among the “good.”⁸

Whereas these persecutors Hoss, Eichmann, Stangl, and all the rest meant to silence the Jews and humiliate through mass nakedness, a few of their intended victims managed to speak back and affirm their humanity. Livia Bitton Jackson records that after the shocking, initial denuding and shaving at Auschwitz, a “curious effect” occurred: “Girls who have continually wept at separation from [family] now began to giggle at the strange appearance of their friends. Some shriek with laughter Wild, noisy embraces. Shrieking, screaming disbelief. Some girls bury their faces in their palms and howl, rolling on the ground” (Rittner and Roth 79). Jackson attributes this boisterousness to losing the “burden” of “individuality” and of “the recent past” (Rittner and Roth 79); she might also include a youth’s ability to find the body not *in and of itself* shameful. Of course, the moment is short-lived in this upside down world where exuberance is “wrong” and torment

“right”: “*Was ist los?*” What’s the matter? A few swings of the SS whip restores order” (79).

As Jackson is able to reply to her would-be silencers in this autobiographical account, Primo Levi in his memoirs and Paul Celan in poetry speak back and consciously critique the cultural code of “the naked damned.” Levi scatters a number of allusions to *Inferno* and to Last Judgment scripture in his books *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Drowned and the Saved*, to give readers a known picture from Dante’s fantasized nightmare for otherwise unimaginable reality and to salvage a solace from a passage in Dante, but also to reject some social training that comes through Dante and Last Judgment sources.

Levi first refers to Dante to try to communicate the incomprehensible reality of the Lager system. On the truck from the transport trains to the Lager, the driver, “bristling with arms” and pilfering watches from the Italian Jews, becomes “our Charon,” Dante’s irascible ferryman to hell (*Survival* 21). Guards land their blows like “the devils of Malabolge,” the whippers in the “evil pockets” of Dante’s eighth circle (*Survival* 107). When the women of Ravensbrück are forced to shovel sand in a repeating circle, each dumping her heavy load in the hot sun to the woman next to her, Levi explains, “this torment of body and spirit, mythical and Dantesque, is to prevent resistance, to humiliate” (*Drowned* 121). Such work-to-no-purpose has the specificity of one of Dante’s allegorical torments, seemingly meaning-laden, but leading nowhere.

In alluding to Dante, Levi also recognizes that several aspects of the philosophy behind the *Inferno* have dangerously imprinted the civilian society in which the Lager system is embedded. For Christian Europeans, that philosophy may foster both indifference toward others’ suffering and a negative attitude even toward their own human embodiment. That is, the dream-traveler Dante gradually learns that all these naked souls he meets, pitiful as they may at first have seemed to him, *deserve* to suffer; Virgil, in fact, angrily teaches him to extinguish his “passion”: his anguished, empathetic suffering at the sight of hell’s inmates (Pinsky 158). When Levi is forced to help build a factory for synthetic rubber, he discovers that the local civilians who come to work there explain away the slave-laborers’ emaciated and only partly clothed condition as some kind of merited punishment; to these onlookers, as to Dante, the prisoners “must be tainted by some mysterious, grave sin” (*Survival* 121). Although one rare civilian manages to slip Levi a life-saving daily ration of soup, most distance themselves, through a training that associates suffering with evil-doers. This training was available not only from Dante but also from Last Judgment art and doctrine. If some busy figures in the Last Judgment

paintings hit and shove other cringing figures, viewers learn not to intervene but rather to approve some unknown, higher plan.

Levi shrewdly notices that a teaching of bodily chastisement and self-sacrifice hurts the self-proclaimed “superior” people as well as those labeled “inferior”: “the insipid violence of the ‘drill’ had already in 1934 begun to invade the field of education and had been turned against the German people themselves” (*Drowned* 118). For example, martinets at schools were prodding adolescent boys and girls into marches of fifty kilometers a day with heavy knapsacks. This penchant for self-discipline to the point of pain derives from the Christian concept of fallen nature; some churchmen went on to assume that the body’s invariably impure impulses would require constant punishment. The “mysterious, grave sin,” which Levi sees assumed in the eyes of the civilians, resides first just in *having* a body (*Survival* 121). In medieval days, fasting, self-denial, and flagellation were considered good; everyone must suffer, from the perfect Christ, nailed to the cross because God needed blood payment for sin, to the imperfect damned, torn by God’s appointed devils. These Christian ideals of obligatory suffering and punishment, somehow detached from any Christian compassion, survived into anti-Christian militarism because they were useful; military authorities could manipulate recruits and civilians by invoking old ideas of self-sacrifice. If such useless trials as the German children’s marches burdened the elect, the fate reserved for the damned, the Jews, was not only to be killed, but to linger before the final murder with the greatest “waste,” “stupidity,” and “torment” (*Drowned* 120).

Although *The Inferno* certainly perpetuated the mindset that to be naked *is* to be damned, an idea that Levi vigorously questions, it must be said in all fairness to Dante that just as Levi has sunk to his most wormlike lethargy, the recollection of a passage from Dante helps him hold onto his humanity. A French prisoner, Jean, wants to learn Italian, so in a rare moment when he and Levi are walking alone to fetch soup, Levi dredges up lines from *The Divine Comedy*. As Dante’s character Ulysses exhorts his lost sailors, Levi blurts out the encouraging lines to Jean: “Think of your breed; for brutish ignorance / Your mettle was not made; you were made men, / To follow after knowledge and excellence” (qtd. in *Survival* 113). Levi hopes that Jean catches the urgency to remember their own human calling, even when treated inhumanely. The need to struggle out of imposed brutish ignorance “has to do with us two, who dare to reason of these things with the poles of the soup on our shoulders” (*Survival* 114).

Levi recounts that, there among the German beasts in Auschwitz who were attempting to turn him into a beast, he seems to be hearing Ulysses’ words “for the

first time: like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forget who I am and where I am” (*Survival* 113). He hears the lines, in fact, as if in a Last Judgment scene, which could come to him either from a Jewish tradition of Last Judgment or from Christian versions in his native Italy. In the Old Testament, “the great trumpet shall be blown” as the Lord gathers the scattered Israelite survivors (Isa. 27.1-13); in the New Testament, seven trumpets precipitate torments (Rev. 8.6). Yet when Levi hears his trumpet, he reasons for himself, as Ulysses has urged his sailors to do; on his own initiative, Levi changes the trumpeting voice from a harsh, judging God, inherited from both religions, to a loving, encouraging one. Although he admits that “we,” Jews as well as Christians, might want everything to be as clear as Christ declares them on “Judgment Day,” with “sheep” herded apart from “goats” and “righteous” people delineated from “reprobates,” he knows that it is not so easy, nor desirable, to separate all-good from all-evil (*Drowned* 37; Matt. 25.32).

It might seem obvious for Levi to sort Jews to the side of innocent victims and Nazis to the side of guilty beasts, yet he will not aid this polarization. First, the Lager system, Levi says, does not make saints of its victims. Rather, the mad, senseless violence creates desperate sufferers who scramble to survive, by any means. The resulting elaborate hierarchy among the Jewish prisoners—of “Prominents” who dominate weaker prisoners, and “Kapos” who hurt their fellows, out of hope to gain favor or simply out of helpless frustration—belongs to a vast “gray zone,” which Levi declines to judge (*Drowned* 44). He is horrified to find that “the enemy was all around but also inside” (*Drowned* 38). Moreover, he will not completely separate the Germans into a group of unmixed villains. Instead, he assesses all in the Lager, from SS man to Kapo to hopeless slave, as “paradoxically fraternized in a uniform internal desolation” (*Survival* 121).

Levi further makes an effort not to explain SS men as born monsters, “afflicted by an original flaw,” saying, with extreme generosity, that “they had our faces, but they had been reared badly” (*Drowned* 202).⁹ For about a dozen years the National Socialists had controlled schooling, popular culture, and news outlets, with a “barrier erected against pluralism of information” and a push to “deify the state” (*Drowned* 29, 122, 125). But even before that controlling regime, German training had emphasized “technological and organizational perfectionism,” militarism, and, equally damaging, the Christian requirement to chastise the body—their own bodies as well as those of perceived “others” (*Drowned* 86).

Remembering the message of Dante’s character Ulysses that “you were made men,” not meant to be brutalized beasts, Levi manages to salvage one of his

most surprising moments of shared humanity, even during the worst, mocking imposition of public nakedness. When the SS wanted to get rid of sick prisoners or simply make room for new deportees, the Nazis stripped and crowded the men into an inadequate space and let them wait interminably, then made each run back and forth singly before SS men. On the basis of a few seconds' glance front and back, the overseer nodded which of the exhibited bodies—12,000 men in an afternoon—would be “selected”: marked out to be murdered, sent to the gas chambers at some unknown moment within the next three days. But at this point in his account, when the prisoners are still awaiting inspection in a herd, “a warm and compact human mass,” Levi judges that being naked together may be “unusual,” but it is, nevertheless, “not unpleasant” (*Survival* 127). Levi stunningly gives witness that human dignity reasserts itself, totally unexpectedly, as the prisoners take back from intended humiliation a small, mutual, bodily comfort.

Like Primo Levi, the poet Paul Celan experienced the Holocaust firsthand, and he too uses Last Judgment imagery in an ironic but finally revisionary way. He was forced to build roads as a slave laborer; his parents were killed in a concentration camp in Transnistria: his mother from a bullet to the neck, his father from squalor and typhus. The man who was born Paul Antschel in Romania in 1920 later changed his name to Ancel, then to a rearrangement of its letters, Celan, when he escaped to France after the war. In his Holocaust poems “Psalm” and “Posaunenstelle,” Celan alludes to both Old Testament and New Testament imagery of Last Judgment. Yet the poems show that no resurrection is possible.

In his poem “Psalm,” Celan flatly declares that

Niemand knetet uns wieder aus Erde und Lehm,
niemand bespricht unsern Staub.
Nobody kneads us again out of earth and loam,
nobody speaks us again out of dust. (152, my
translation throughout).

This “Nobody” replaces the name Yahweh, who hasn’t been found to exist, let alone repeat his Genesis creation by Word out of nothing, or of Adam out of dust. Nor can this “Nobody” God re-gather his scattered people. The prophet Isaiah pictures several versions of such a day of Judgment and re-gathering, when “the Lord with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan,” the enemy of the Jews, and a “trumpet” shall gather Israelite survivors to “blossom and bud” anew (ch. 27). A few chapters later, Isaiah again describes a terrible “day of the Lord’s vengeance”

against enemies, when the desolate wilderness into which the Israelites have fled will suddenly “rejoice” with song and “blossom as the rose” (chs. 34-35). In Celan’s post-Holocaust “Psalm,” however, the Jewish people have had their spectacular blooming only as “Niemandrose,” the “Nobody’s-Rose.” They are a drooped, already bloomed, blown flower, unrevivable, with

dem Griffel seelenhell,
dem Staubfaden himmelswüst,
der Krone rot,
 our pistil roasted, soul-bright,
 our pollen-dust heaven-blasted,
 our crown reddened (152).

Instead of nurturing his blossom, the Lord has let it wither. Speaking only his “Purpurwort,” “purpled word,” the Lord apparently lets his own people be bludgeoned and he makes them “sing”—a distant echo of Isaiah’s rejoicing—but now just a singing out, in pain, “über, o über / dem Dorn,” “over, oh on / the thorn.” This “Nobody” God has cursed his people out of Nothing, into Nothing, over the final Thorn of the camps.¹⁰

Whereas Celan’s “Psalm” draws on Judaism’s Isaiah for a version of Judgment, his short, posthumously published poem “Posaunenstelle,” “The Place of the Trumpets,” focuses on one detail of a Christian Last Judgment painting.¹¹ He locates the Last Trump tips “tief in glühenden / Leertext, / in Fackelhöhe, / im Zeitloch,” literally, “deep in the glowing / Empty Text, / at the height of the torch, / in the Time Hole” (330). In most Last Judgment paintings, the place of the trumpets lies at the level of an enthroned Christ’s head and torso, cordoned off from the cowering souls who await judgment below. However, in versions like that of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, copied onto a famous engraving by Peter van der Heyden in 1558, the trumpets do not all stay in heaven. Instead, two trumpets poke through a semicircular line separating heaven and earth, leaving half their long shafts, their blaring mouths, and Christ’s feet on a globe, all in the air below the curve. On the earth side of this same tight place of the trumpets, a long, smoking torch flares, while devils sort a vast crowd of tiny, naked souls. The efficient devils, looking like plump humans except for an occasional pointy head and long tail, push anxious souls up a ladder into a tilted boat, ready to launch it into the gaping maw of an enormous, whale-like head, just beyond the right edge of the semicircular

place of the trumpets. Sharp teeth stud the creature's upper palate, an echo of the semicircle bounding the heaven, and the creature's blank, weary eyes stare out over the snout.

In Celan's poem, for which Bruegel's *Last Judgment* makes an apt illustration, the place of the trumpets is named in three ways: "in Fackelhöhe" ("at the height of the torch"), "in glühenden Leertext" ("in the glowing Empty Text"), and "im Zeitloch" ("in the Time Hole") (330). The Greek words from Revelation that the King James translators rendered into English as "lamp" and "trumpet" appear in Protestant Martin Luther's German translation as "Fackel" and "Posaunen," "torch" and "trombone" (Celan xxxi). The King James translators made the "lamp" a term of comparison for a star that falls at the sound of one of the trumpets, to turn rivers deadly (Rev 8.10). Bruegel's picture includes this falling star as the long, smoking torch between two flaring trumpet ends. In Celan's poem, the fallen star seems to be God himself, whose glowing, biblical texts have been revealed as "Empty Text": empty promises, a Holy Writ full of holes. Hence, the first five lines could be translated:

The place of Last Trump tips,
deep in torched time,
in time's Hol-
-y Writ, in
torn-star tail . . .

Actually, a core of emptiness in texts of End-Time could be glimpsed long before the Holocaust, in the Last Judgment texts and illustrations often devoid of compassion. A few chapters in the Old Testament, for example, and the Book of Revelation in the New, belong to a genre that might be called Revenge Literature. Small, weakened groups, egregiously persecuted, encourage their own members to hope for a better future and to imagine a horrible retribution against their enemies. When First Isaiah promises that God will use the Mēdes to destroy Assyria, he does not shrink from characterizing his Lord as ruthless: "Their children also shall be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses shall be spoiled, and their wives ravished" (13.16). Similarly violent, Revelation imagines militant angels trampling the "winepress" of "the wrath of God"; by "wine," John means blood, and he relishes this blood's flow to the height of the horses' bridles (Rev. 14.20). Although each group sees itself as "good," blotting out a completely polarized enemy, each in

turn risks augmenting that evil by simply duplicating it: “and they shall take them captives, whose captives they were” (Isa. 14.2).

Once Holy Writ makes such torture imaginable and acceptable, the glowing, incendiary words and pictures of Last Judgment finally burnt another, real “Hole in Time,” Celan suggests, when the Third Reich transferred elements of the myth to the bodies of prisoners in the camps. Like the devils in Bruegel’s vision, minor guards leapt on a back here, yanked an arm there. The hordes of naked people streaming to left or right in van der Heyden’s engraving materialized in the crowds of naked prisoners forced to run past SS officers at the casual “selections” for death. Like the sorting angels, the SS “reprieved” some souls for further slavery, where they would be blasted morning and evening by what Primo Levi calls “infernal music” (*Survival* 50). As ambiguous as the New Testament, angelic trumpet music that turns out to be not sweet but bitter, an overture to torment, sentimental tunes and lively marches played by coerced Jewish musicians did not enliven but deadened, since the music mustered slave laborers and beat out a rhythm for pain. For those naked prisoners sent in the opposite direction, away from labor, the smoking torch of the sixteenth-century engraving goes on floating in the smoke of the twentieth-century crematoria. Time stops and understanding gapes, as other human beings shoved six million Jews into the blank-eyed maw of the gas chambers.

From our perspective after the Holocaust, it now appears that there was something obscene in Last Judgment works like Bruegel’s, where the phallic trumpets forcibly penetrate the space of the naked humans. Yet Celan is not willing to leave “the place of the trumpets” a site of torture. After his shocked look behind the apocalyptic veil in his terrifying century, Celan advises us, in the poem’s simple concluding lines, to re-enter the Last Judgment picture and remake it: “hör dich ein / mit dem Mund,” “hear yourself in / with your mouth” (330).¹² He asks us to listen to the witnesses of the Holocaust and hear their urgent message, to absorb their words and empathize with the survivors as message-bearers. After listening, however, we must not remain silent. With our mouths substituted for the trumpet mouths ordering torture, he wants us to speak our way into a new meeting-place of heaven and earth: by testimonial and stark poetry, by political negotiations, and by a listening-and-responding dialogue among peoples. To those who have been and might yet be violated by that obscene trump of intolerance, we must give a more loving mouth.

The Last Judgment and Dante traditions of naked damned and their larger social ideologies, which the Nazis Stangl, Höss, and Eichmann had imbibed, and which the holocaust survivors Levi and Celan recognized and condemned, teach

several terrible lessons: obedience to an authority figure with no questions asked, polarization of good and evil, primacy of status achieved by hard work up a social ladder, rejection of “womanly” pity in favor of “manly” coldness, praise of self-sacrifice in and of itself, and devaluation of the body, with a dynamic for procuring one’s own sensual pleasures—as long as somebody in the corner of the picture pays for it with pain. The Nazis believed that they could display the naked body over and over, to scorn its corruptibility while catching a last furtive glimpse, but only if they quickly pushed it into the maw of hell.

Lest anyone think that all of these dangerous ideas have faded away, one need only recall the photos of American guards lording it over naked prisoners at Abu Ghraib in 2004 (Hersh, “Torture” 43). In paintings of Dante and Virgil from Botticelli to Gustave Doré, rich robes and prestigious laurel leaves assure the viewer who are the “good,” licensed to disdain the hordes: naked and therefore *obviously* “evil.” In an unwelcome similarity at Abu Ghraib prison, proudly self-photographed American guards rely on spiffy blue gloves and prestigious camouflage or khaki to distinguish themselves from the naked, fit for torment.

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Notes

1 Technically, *Inferno* does not depict Last Judgment, but Dante is thought to have borrowed the nakedness at every level of his hell from Giotto's *Last Judgment* (Clark 12-13). Future illustrators of doomsday in turn borrowed from Dante's text and from his illustrators.

2 Another "aim" of mass nudity could be said to be the theft of clothes for material gain, and even hair was made into "felt and mattresses" (Rittner and Roth 74). However, this *use* value seems more a cynical opportunism after the fact, rather than an original motive. Undressing as if for delousing was also a ruse to keep people from rioting.

3 For other sexual exploitation by fellow prisoners and the difficulties for interviewers and interviewees in framing these events, see Joan Ringelheim in Ofer and Weitzman 341-45.

4 Shifting the link of sex and violence from theories of behavior to representation in art and photographs, Susan Sontag claims that "Most depictions of tormented, mutilated bodies do arouse a prurient interest" (95). She does not explain why, but art conventions that allow painters to depict writhing from violent torture, but not twisting in consenting sexual ecstasy, could invite viewers to repurpose an image *away* from torture to sex. On the other hand, conventions that keep combining torture and nakedness for centuries could be *forging* a sex and violence link. See also James Young's provocative question about the line between "historical exhibit vs. sensationalist exhibitionism," in his discussion of photographs of women stripped and about to be shot, displayed wall-sized at Yad Vashem (1782-83).

5 During World War I, when Höss was a teenage soldier, a popular novel by Walter Flex idealized the nude soldier emerging from water into sunlight; the "chastity and strength" of the naked body was somehow supposed to cancel out the violence of his task, while eroticism remained both promised and forbidden, just as it did in Third Reich nude statues of the glorified blond (Mosse 52).

6 Interestingly, young women at university during the Third Reich were told to cast off the "soft, over-feminine ideal of woman which is held by Western and Oriental peoples, but does not correspond to the harsher German living conditions" (qtd. in Ofer and Weitzman 89-90). In other words, just as men (with all their human *potential* to be kind) were trained to squelch pity in order to be "masculine," so too women strove to be as "good" as (as bad as) un pitying men.

7 Not only officers but an underling admits that Sobibor is "*Fürchterlich*—dreadful," but then cushions himself by insisting that "we sacrifice ourselves . . . for our Führer" (Sereny 135-36).

8 While Höss, unlike Stangl, does not specifically mention knowing texts or art of the naked damned, he does say that his father, intending Rudolf to become a Catholic priest, took him from the age of six on "pilgrimages to all the holy places in our own country, as well as to Einsiedeln in Switzerland and to Lourdes in France" (31), so it seems likely he knew of the naked hordes from plentiful Last Judgment paintings, engravings, relief sculptures over cathedral doors, and so on.

9 When Levi wrote a preface to a translation of Höss's prison writings, many readers found Levi's judgment "not a monster" reprehensible (qtd. in Rosen 10). However, the dangerous training that Levi indicts makes Höss's hideousness not anomalous but all too typical.

10 Speculating from this poem in "The Long Life of Metaphor," George Steiner muses, "The Jew in the Shoah speaks to and against the nonspeaking, the unspeaking, of God. So long as the Jew addresses God, God must listen. It may be that this compelled listening has, in the Auschwitz world, become the fragile thread—*der Staubfaden*—whereby hangs the existence, the survival, of God..." (169).

11 John Felstiner helpfully points out that Celan wrote this poem in 1960 after a visit to Israel, where an archaeologist had recently discovered a toppled stone from the Second Temple with words meaning "to the place [or house] of trumpeting," or "place of the shofar blast." Felstiner recalls that when people heard the sound of the shofar in the Book of Joshua, "they shouted themselves into the promised land" (272-73). What I will be arguing here is that part of that shout has to be a demand to change some of the attitudes encoded in both Jewish and Christian Last Judgment art and texts.

12 Stéphane Moses suggests shofar at Mount Sinai (in Exodus) as the model here, with godly revelation changed to poetic revelation. However, this reading misses both the bitterness of Celan's vision of Last Trump, and the incredible force of Celan's exhortation to intervene and change the picture of violence.

KATHY PHILLIPS is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Hawai'i. Among her books are *Manipulating Masculinity: War and Gender in Modern British and American Literature* and *Virginia Woolf against Empire*.