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W. D. Snodgrass' The Fuehrer Bunker. Confession, Memory, and the Personification of History

In 2016 the Berlin Story Museum, a privately-operated tourist attraction that sells products ranging from guide books to segments of the Berlin Wall, reconstructed a room from the so-called Führerbunker to provide visitors with a simulated experience of the place where Hitler spent the final months of his life.¹ Another private organization leads underground tours of actual bunker complexes, but the original Führerbunker cannot be included, the website takes pains to point out, because it was completely destroyed by Soviet troops.² Individual artifacts were preserved, such as a telephone purportedly used by Hitler and recently auctioned off by Alexander Historical Auctions in Maryland.³ Such artifacts, like the replica of the bunker, continue to fascinate collectors and tourists - to the consternation of those who consider them tasteless and even perverse.⁴ Whether in bad taste or not, interest in the Nazis and their paraphernalia - real or virtual - persists. Indeed, the bunker has been reconstructed before, for instance as the setting for Oliver Hirschbiegel's Oscar-nominated film *Der Untergang* (2004). The reconstruction that

1 Berlin Story Museum, accessed February 24, 2017, <http://berlinstory.de/dokumentation-fuehrerbunker/>.

2 Berliner Unterwelten, accessed February 24, 2017, <http://berliner-unterwelten.de/fuehrerbunker.328.0.html>.

3 Lenz, Susanne. "Antiquität aus dem Führerbunker." *Berliner Zeitung* 44, February 21, 2017, 21.

4 Krause, Tilman. "Den Führerbunker nachzubauen, ist geschmacklos." *Die Welt*, October 21, 2016, accessed February 24, 2017, <https://www.welt.de/kultur/artic le 159097191 /Den-Fuehrerbunker-nachzubauen-ist-geschmacklos.html>.

will be considered in this essay is a sequence of poems by W. D. Snodgrass called *The Fuehrer Bunker*, published as a complete cycle in 1995 and as a work in progress, under the alternate spelling *The Führer Bunker*, in 1977, and dramatized twice for the stage in 1981 and 1987.⁵

Snodgrass originally intended to write a play about Hitler's final days, but he scrapped that project for the collection of poems that would take him 35 years to complete.⁶ The poems are dramatic monologues in the voices of Hitler, Joseph and Magda Goebbels and their children, Goering, Eva Braun, Albert Speer, Himmler, and supporting characters such as Martin Bormann, the generals Gotthard Heinrici and Helmuth Weidling, and the secretary Traudl Junge. The presentation is chronological, and the sequencing provides a dramatic structure that culminates in the suicides of the central figures; but there is no frame narrative beyond that provided by the dates, no direct dialogue between characters, and very little in the way of dramatic interaction. What holds the monologues together is a series of interconnected limericks functioning as a bawdy chorus. The central figure of these limericks is Old Lady Barkeep, borrowed from a traditional cycle of obscene German folk songs. One of the few authorial asides informs the readers that "During World War II, Berliners revived a figure from Renaissance song and verse, Frau Wirtin, for satirical verses, similar to limericks and often obscene, about their leaders."⁷ The obscenity of Old Lady Barkeep/Frau Wirtin is one of the leitmotifs of the sequence; it also sets the tone of individual poems. For instance the central monologue, featuring Hitler on his last birthday, interlaces personal anxieties, obsessions, fantasies, and childhood memories with excerpts from what appears to be a sadomasochistic guide to sex.⁸ Hitler, the mass murderer, reveals himself to be a mama's boy, a neat-freak, and a coprophiliac. Thus while the monologues do not constitute a play, they do follow a script, and that script links the historical catastrophe of genocide to psychological pathologies and to obscenity.

Snodgrass' psycho-sexual portrait of the Nazi is keeping with the

5 Stephen Haven, ed., *The Poetry of W. D. Snodgrass: Everything Human* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), xi.

6 Philip Hoy, *W. D. Snodgrass in Conversation with Philip Hoy* (London: Between The Lines/Ipswich Book Co., Ltd., 1998), 35.

7 W. D. Snodgrass, *The Fuehrer Bunker: The Complete Cycle* (Brockport, NY: BOA Editions, Ltd., 1995), 15, italics in original.

8 *Fuehrer Bunker*, 102-105.

sadomasochistic approach taken in the 1970s and 1980s by films such as *The Night Porter* and novels like *The White Hotel*.⁹ The approach deliberately courts the transgression and outrage repeated, in a tamer form, in the debates over building a replica of the Fuehrerbunker in Berlin.¹⁰ These debates have become ritualized in ways that Susanne Rohr and I identify in *Comedy - Avant-Garde - Scandal* (2010). Holocaust art, we argue in that book, has come to be characterized by recurrent patterns of provocation and protest. This is because scandal is widely seen as a tool of memory-work. The Holocaust continues to defy understanding, scholars and artists maintain, so art has to act out the past in the same way symptoms act out painful memories. Artistic transgression is a tool for breaking through historical repression; aesthetic experience serves as shock therapy; and scandal manifests the discomfort attending the return of the repressed. Outrage, according to this theory, is therapeutic because it signals our ongoing sensitivity to a past that must be felt before it can be understood. Another way to put this is that discomfort is an aid to remembering historical events that lie beyond the sensorium of direct experience.¹¹

Snodgrass provides an interesting case study for any conception of Holocaust art as a form of memory-work. Indeed, he is interesting for two opposing reasons. First, since the 1980s a small group of scholars has persistently defended his psychological portraits of Nazis as important contributions to Holocaust commemoration. Second, these scholars are in the minority. Although Snodgrass was soundly criticized during the 35 years he took to compose the cycle, he was even more soundly forgotten. His Pulitzer Prize-winning first book of poems, *Heart's Needle* (1959),

9 See Andrew S. Gross and Michael J. Hoffman, "Passions of Grief: Corporeality and Obscenity in the Early Representations of the Holocaust," in *Projecting Words, Writing Images: Intersections of the Literary and the Visual in American Cultural Practice*, ed. John Leo and Marek Paryz (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 209-234. Also see Gross and Hoffman, "Holocaust Pornography: Obscene Films and Other Narratives," *Polish Journal for American Studies* 4 (2010): 75-93.

10 As Krause puts it, "Berlin hat seinen Ruf als Hauptstadt der Geschmacklosigkeit wieder einmal glanzvoll bestätigt," n.p.

11 Andrew S. Gross and Susanne Rohr. *Comedy - Avant-Garde - Scandal- Remembering the Holocaust after the End of History* (Heidelberg: Universitäts- verlag Winter, 2010). See, for instance, pp. 112-113.

was widely acknowledged as one of the founding documents of confessional poetry. He was ranked with poets like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and John Berryman as the founder of a poetic movement. Now he has disappeared from the canon; indeed he has been banished because of what many critics see as his obsessive preoccupation with *The Fuehrer Bunker*. The volume that culminates in the suicide of Nazi leaders is widely seen as the cyanide pill that killed Snodgrass' career.¹²

Snodgrass knew that *The Fuehrer Bunker* would be controversial. Indeed, he designed the volume to confront American readers with something he felt they didn't want to know about themselves: "It's comforting to believe that the Nazis were utterly different from the rest of us, so different that we can describe them as inhuman - or bestial or fiendish or whatever - and so different that any attempt to understand their behavior is bound to fail. The Führer Bunker assumes this is false."¹³ *The Fuehrer Bunker* places the Nazis in proximity to contemporary readers in two programmatic epigraphs. One is attributed to Joseph Goebbels: "Even if we lose this war, we still win, for our spirit will have penetrated our enemies' hearts." The other provides the gloss: "Mother Teresa, asked when it was she started her work for abandoned children, replied, 'On the day I discovered I had a Hitler inside me.'"¹⁴

The critics who defend Snodgrass support his efforts to confront readers with their own inner-Hitlers.¹⁵ They praise his ability to scandalize us into remembering the parts of ourselves we don't want to admit.¹⁶ The descent into *The Fuehrer Bunker* is not supposed to be historical so much as therapeutic. It is a descent into the bunker of the unconscious, which can be built anywhere because its basic architectural features are universal. Laurence Goldstein established this line of argument in 1988 by explaining how the Hitler-figure's "enemies disgust him and drive him deeper into the metaphorical bunker of his psyche where his loathing for figures of the alien is compelled to expose its

12 See, for instance, Larry Levis, "Waiting for the End of the World: Snodgrass and The Führer Bunker" in Haven, *The Poetry of W. D. Snodgrass*, esp. p. 281.

13 Hoy, 37.

14 *Fuehrer Bunker*, 11.

15 See Matthew Boswell, *Holocaust Impiety in Literature, Popular Music, and Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 80.

16 See Laurence Goldstein, "The Führer Bunker and the New Discourse about Nazism," in Haven, *The Poetry of W. D. Snodgrass*, 254. See also Boswell, 88.

features and origins." 17 The features and origins of loathing are potentially buried in all people: "Who of his auditors has not sympathized with such types, and caught him- or herself acting the role in reality or imagination?" 18 The trick of the poem is to surprise us with our own sympathy, so we see in Hitler a mirror of ourselves: "Hitler's paranoia, by a terrible historical irony, ensures our sympathy. He becomes credible by echoing, in a finer tone, the language of abuse we have practiced on figures like himself." 19

Matthew Boswell has revived a version of this argument in his 2012 book *Holocaust Impiety*. He insists that artists like Snodgrass court scandal not out of disrespect to the dead; rather they act on the need of "attacking those who see no connection between historical atrocity and their own values, political systems and day-to-day lives." 20 This attack involves bringing our "understanding of the Holocaust" in closer proximity to our "understanding of ourselves." 21 It also involves challenging the "authoritarian assumptions about who has the very right to represent the Holocaust" and the "fascist" tendency of what he calls "Holocaust piety" to deny dissenting voices: "The disquieting parallelism between Holocaust piety and the censoriousness of Fascism might suggest that they somehow share the same DNA; that they are bound by the polymers of congenital prejudice." 22 These genetic metaphors evince the strain involved in pushing psychological mechanisms beyond the limits of personal memory and onto impersonal structures such as language. One historical cruelty produces another, in Boswell's reading, in the same way that one strand of genetic code might be said to replicate itself in the next. Leaving aside the question of whether language can be said to function like biology, it is clear that Boswell sees a continuum between the psychological repression involved in decorous or "pious" ways of talking about the Holocaust and the political repression that unleashed the Holocaust in the first place. It is art's job to fight repression with provocation in order to keep language, and by extension society, in good health: "The Fuehrer Bunker is a work of formal and linguistic

17 Goldstein, 246.

18 Goldstein, 243.

19 Goldstein, 244.

20 Boswell, 4.

21 Boswell, 3.

22 Boswell, 5, 9.

experimentation whose most important theme is not the interpolation of individual psychology into history ... but rather the postwar survival of poetry, even of language itself."²³ Goldstein argues that Snodgrass' Hitler confronts us with the dangerous parts of ourselves. Boswell, coming after the linguistic turn, argues that Snodgrass' poetry is a kind of talking cure for language, reminding it of its (fascist, authoritarian, repressive) proclivity to exclude.

This essay will turn to Snodgrass to explore the belief, widespread among artists and critics, that Holocaust art involves a kind of memory - work, either at the personal level or at the level of discourse. In particular it will explore the implied link between descending into the bunker of the past to discover the horror of Nazism and excavating similar horrors from the bunker of the self - or from language. I will begin by assessing Snodgrass' significance to confessional poetry, then go on to show how the therapeutic model of lyricism developed by confessional poets was linked to liberal accounts of personal freedom during the Cold War. Then, by turning to a close analysis of *The Fuehrer Bunker*, I will show how confessional lyricism develops into a generalized poetics of memory that tends to ignore the specifics of both history and experience. My aim is to demonstrate that Snodgrass pursues the poetics of memory to the point of oblivion, excising himself from the canon at the same time he encourages those who did not experience history to remember it first-hand. His *Old Lady Barkeep*, I will argue, is the personification of memory detached from history and distanced from the experiencing self. In spite of Snodgrass' poetic talent, his *Fuehrerbunker* is little more than a simulated experience - a facsimile meant to titillate and shock - that tells us more about the history of American poetry than about any specific place, time, or historical figures.

The *Fuehrer Bunker* does not provide the shock of recognition; however, it can serve as an object lesson for the risks involved in turning memory into a historical paradigm. Memories persist. One of the lessons taught by history, however, is that of endings: historical catastrophes recede in time, historical locations are destroyed, dictators die; and there are differences, not only in time but in structure and magnitude, between fascism and linguistic piety, between political repression and personal hang-ups, between a historical bunker and the mind. Art that is supposed

23 Boswell 63.

to remind us of ourselves by constructing historical facsimiles, results in an impoverished notion of the self and the past. Instead of subjects in history we get subjectivity detached from history, detached in other words from the very grounds of experience, and plotted according to a predictable psychological narrative of repression and provocation that resembles nothing so much as an obscene limerick.

Confessional Poetry in the Cold War: Lyricism, Liberalism, and the Talking Cure

Modernist poetry rebelled against the subjective lyric. Pound and Eliot preached the doctrine of impersonality: poetry, in Eliot's formulation, spoke in the voice of tradition rather than personal experience. Pound insisted that his speakers were "personae" or masks, and he modeled his own poetic practice on the epic, which he called "the tale of the tribe." After World War II, however, the impersonal orientation of modernist poetry seemed suspect. Eliot won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948, but critics were careful to distinguish his poetry of personal faith from the anti-Semitic statements he had made in the 1930s. Pound was arrested in Italy and charged with treason for the anti-Semitic and pro-Fascist broadcasts he made for Rome Radio during the war. The poets who claimed to speak for tradition and the tribe seemed to be guilty of discrimination, exclusion, perhaps even worse. Modernist poetry remained influential, but the doctrine of impersonality fell into disrepute because of its perceived links to authoritarianism.²⁴

Pound was found incompetent to stand trial by reason of insanity and committed to a federal mental facility. He would wait nearly twelve years to be released, but his poetry was partly rehabilitated when *The Pisan Cantos* - the series of poems he wrote while in American captivity outside of Pisa - were published in 1948 and received the first Bollingen Prize a year later. Pound won, in part, because the award committee misunderstood his poems as expressions of personal remorse. They were wrong. *The Pisan Cantos* begin with an elegy for Mussolini and contain

24 See my discussion in Andrew S. Gross, *The Pound Reaction: Liberalism and Lyricism in Midcentury American Literature* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015), esp. pp. 10, 212-213.

many explicitly anti-Semitic statements. Parts of poems might confess a sense of hopelessness, but they are not confessions of guilt. Nevertheless, The Pisan Cantos were judged to involve a rejection of impersonal poetics, and hence a rejection of authoritarianism, in two slightly contradictory ways. First, since Pound wrote while being held in isolation, without access to his usual reference materials, the poems are necessarily more personal or lyrical than much of the Cantos. Their lyricism seemed to constitute a defacto endorsement of the validity of personal expression, and hence of the basic liberal principle of individualism. This principle also played a role in the second, slightly contradictory justification of Pound. After the war it was common to argue that only totalitarian regimes forced artists to tow the party line. Thus, even if Pound did still harbor fascist tendencies, his poetry could nevertheless be understood as an affirmation of free speech. The Cold War was responsible for many historical ironies, including two that were formative for American verse: a series of prison poems came to stand for artistic freedom, and a Fascist became the unwitting spokesperson of liberal democracy.²⁵

Behind these ironies lay a paradoxical argument that carried a lot of weight in the postwar years. Art was supposed to be politically significant to the extent that it was personal, which is to say apolitical. This "liberal aesthetic," as I have called it elsewhere, motivated postwar poets to follow Pound's personal turn, or what was understood to constitute a personal turn, to write subjectivist lyrics. Robert Phillips dubbed this type of verse "confessional poetry," perhaps in tacit recognition of Pound's presumed confession, and certainly resonating with the number of political confessions that shaped the era - confessions beginning with Whittaker Chambers' and emanating from the political left more frequently than the right. However, it is important to note that Phillips did not mean to draw attention to matters of sin and repentance or judgment and guilt. While the term "confession" implies a listener with the power to judge, confessionalism was understood to primarily describe the poet's relation to himself:

A true confessional poet places few barriers, if any, between his self and direct expression of that self, however painful that expression may prove. That is how he differs from all nonconfessional poets such as Eliot and

25 For a more detailed account of this history, see *The Pound Reaction*, esp. pp. 1-41.

Pound, writers who valued privacy and sought expression through the adoption of personae ... or through the use of an objective correlative ... confessional poetry is an expression of personality rather than an escape from it.²⁶

Another way to put this is that confessional poetry is sincere.²⁷ Sincerity denies the validity of external authority, turns its back on the public, and addresses itself to itself in the way John Stuart Mill defined poetry, as a dramatic monologue or "utterance overheard."²⁸

Snodgrass serves as one of Phillip's primary examples of lyrical sincerity, second only to Robert Lowell.²⁹ He calls his chapter on Snodgrass "The Sad Hospital of the World," arguing that life "hurt Snodgrass into writing."³⁰ The hurt has many immanent causes, but it is of a general, existential nature. The poem entitled "The Operation" is emblematic for the speaker's wounded state.³¹ He goes through a medical procedure that leaves him weak and vulnerable, but his recuperation teaches him that everyone is ill. The screams of a child in the hospital resonate with the sounds outside the window, where "sirens may/ Wail for the fugitive."³² In a sense, everyone is a fugitive in the sad hospital of the world. Sickness is a form of alienation experienced by those unable to live the way they please. "Snodgrass [is] obsessed with the individual's loss of identity in America ...," as Phillips puts it, because "Like Lowell, Snodgrass obviously has experienced alienation in the no-man's-land of mid-century America."³³ Phillips's invocation of the keywords "identity" and "alienation," so fashionable among intellectuals of the 1950s and 1960s, reveals that suffering is in some sense a privileged state. The world is sick and the poet, a sensitive soul, manifests the symptoms; those symptoms are painful, to be sure, but they also validate the poetic utterance in the same way pain validates a cry. Poetry is the lyrical

26 Robert Phillips, *The Confessional Poets* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 8-9.

27 See Paul Gaston, *W. D. Snodgrass* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 15.

28 Pound *Reaction*, 20-25.

29 Phillips, 45-46.

30 Phillips, 45.

31 Phillips, 52-53.

32 W. D. Snodgrass, *Hearts Needle* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), 17.

33 Phillips, 48-49.

expression of a modern malady, and that malady is the conformism lurking behind the liberal commitment to personal freedom.

Like many writers in postwar America, Snodgrass was obsessed with conformity. Society only pretended to be individualistic, so the alienated intellectuals believed; it actually produced organization men, men in gray flannel suits, a lonely crowd of outer-directed personalities. The danger in such a society, especially for artists and academics, was selling out. Snodgrass is in part an emblematic figure because his career path skirted the pitfalls of success. After his discharge from the armed forces, he pursued a creative writing degree in the famous writing program at the University of Iowa. His M.F.A. in hand, he steadily moved up the academic ladder, accepting a series of teaching positions at various universities, then a series of tenured professorships after *Heart's Needle* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1960. The tensions involved in this career path are dramatized in *medias res* in "A Cardinal," which serves as the manifesto of *Heart's Needle*. The speaker, struggling with writer's block, leaves the Quonset hut that serves as his temporary student housing, finds a small strip of undeveloped land at the border of campus, and tries to find his voice in the cacophony of competing noises: factory whistles, freight cars, cars on the "supertumpike," "golf balls veer[ing] like tracers," planes, motors, "college air cadets...marching...their cadence," and beneath it all the basic rhythm of "school and market/ the ground bass of our credo - / faith in free enterprise."³⁴ If education has ties to business, how is a poet moving up the career ladder different from a businessman or career bureaucrat? Ultimately, after recurring doubts, the poet finds inspiration in the sincerity of the eponymous birds: "Assertion is their credo;/ style tells their policy."³⁵ The cardinal reminds him of the importance of singing his own song - "each bird its name to say" - and asserting his individuality in the way he once did under the discipline of the navy:

34 *Heart's Needle*, 27-28.

35 *Heart's Needle*, 33; See also Phillips, 54.

We whistle in the dark
 To drive the devils off.
 Each dog creates his bark,
 Even I, in Navy blues,
 I whistled *Wachet Auf*
 to tell the sailors who.³⁶

Whistling in the way that a bird sings or a dog barks, demonstrates the how of sincerity. The rest of the poem maps out its where. Lyricism, at this postwar moment, means locating oneself at the margins of society. The therapy prescribed in the poem is not the marriage of Christ with his true believers, as implied by the reference to the song Bach set to music, but the union of the speaker with the instincts, feelings, and animal desires denied those who march to the military-industrial cadence. It would later prove significant for Snodgrass that while speaking from the margins was fashionable at the time, his language of personal confession - here with reference to the Bach piece - was metaphorically German.

In the years following the confessional movement, scholars became more skeptical of sincerity. A dramatic monologue like Snodgrass' only pretends to be private. His narrow strip of woods on the margin of campus is actually a stage to vent feelings that, in retrospect, seem typical for the time, even calculated to succeed in the university system he was criticizing. Lionel Trilling describes the paradox of sincerity in this way: "we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person, with the result that a judgment may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic."³⁷ I will return to the way authenticity

36 *Hearts Needle*, 32.

37 Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 11.

complicates sincerity in a moment. First, it bears pointing out that when Heart's Needle appeared, even Snodgrass' detractors did not doubt the sincerity of his feelings. Donald Davie, for instance, argued, "No... self-pity, self-esteem, all sorts of self-regard, are fatal to poetry - and most of the poems in Heart's Needle are self-regarding. A poem is not the public parade of a private emotion; however smoothly executed, such parading belongs elsewhere than in the blessedly impersonal art of poetry."³⁸ Davie's call for a return to impersonality was a cry in the wilderness. Most critics were more concerned with defining the conditions under which poetry could be convincingly sincere. In Snodgrass, this involved tracing back the existential wounding to the immanent causes behind it. The critics did not have to look far. The sequence of poems in Heart's Needle that lends its name to the entire volume tells the wrenching tale of a custody battle following a divorce.

The feelings showcased in the poems are those of father trying to maintain contact with his child. Indeed, the eponymous section, dedicated to his daughter, is composed as an extended apostrophe, with the poet repeatedly addressing his daughter as "you." What threatens the intimacy of the father-daughter relationship is society, in the person of the wife or the courts or friends, telling him "If I loved you, they said, I'd leave/ and find my own affairs."³⁹ Nevertheless, the poet wins the battle over his own feelings because the poems help him discover those feelings in the manner of the talking cure. In other words, the poems formalize a therapeutic situation in a mode of address that allows the speaker to discover his personal (sincere, lyrical) feelings through transference, his "I" emerging in relation to a series of shifting "yous." One of the poems is dedicated to Snodgrass' therapist ("My dead blind guide, you lead me here.../To kneel by my old face and know my name"⁴⁰), and even when the therapist doesn't stand in for the daughter, the reader assumes this role, receiving words intended for a more intimate listener. Thus, the final lines of the poem put the reader in the position of the forgiving (or forgiven) child: "you are still my daughter."⁴¹

38 Donald Davie, "Australians and Others," in Haven, *The Poetry of W. D. Snodgrass*, 32.

39 Heart's Needle, 62.

40 Heart's Needle, 6.

41 Heart's Needle, 62.

Thus, the seemingly personal or lyrical orientation of confessional verse is built around the therapeutic structure of the talking cure. Confessional poems are personal, but they also imply a listener. That listener is not supposed to "judge" the confession, but neither is the confession completely private in the way suggested by Phillips; indeed, it inscribes a specific social structure within the intimate space of subjectivity. M. L. Rosenthal, who like Phillips was one of the scholars to popularize the term "confessional," hinted at the structure of sincerity. He describes Snodgrass' fatherly instinct in this way:

Snodgrass...is a confessional poet like Robert Lowell, and he is writing about a stubborn if almost abject father-love hanging onto its object with animal persistence. The quietly satisfying bourgeois family is for him an ideal as genuine peace is an ideal for a world ravaged by actual and by cold war.⁴²

What is remarkable about this passage is its calm invocation of the bourgeois family as a congruent term for animal instinct. Both are supposed to offer refuge from the Cold War, even though Snodgrass' divorce is a kind of battle in itself. Indeed, Rosenthal borrows the Cold War-analogy from Snodgrass' own mournful description of his dissolving marriage.⁴³ Nevertheless, family (like the therapeutic situation that reenacts it) offers a structure for sincere emotions in a way that political conflict does not. Domesticity counts as an extension or staging ground for personal feeling; other aspects of society constitute an intrusion. Thus, while historical or current events do not necessarily cause a divorce, strains in a marriage can reveal something about the psychology of current events.

This personalization of the public realm is characteristic of confessionalism. Indeed, confessional poetry offers a psychological- historical corollary to the political argument put forth in the liberal aesthetic. Just as the personal was supposed to be politically significant to the degree that it was apolitical, the personal is historically significant to the degree that it is emotional, which is to say ahistorical. This one-way analogy is to be found everywhere in the poetry, as when Robert

42 M.L. Rosenthal, "Notes from the Future: Two Poets," in Haven, *The Poetry of W. D. Snodgrass*, 24.

43 *Hearts Needle*, 42.

Lowell describes his experiences in a prison (Lowell served time during the war as a conscientious objector) with lines from a famous foreign policy speech by John Foster Dulles.⁴⁴ Perhaps the most notorious example is Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy," which compares the father-figure to a Nazi and the daughter-speaker to a Jewish victim.⁴⁵ Such analogies do, of course, contain a historical element, but they are a far cry from the impersonal verse of the modernists; indeed, they are based on a model of sincerity that psychologizes society or regards it as a stage for personal feelings. Confessional poetry is an artistic version of what Richard Sennett calls "the tyranny of the intimate," which involves "the measurement of society in psychological terms...." "We have come to care about institutions and events," adds Sennett, "only when we can discern personalities at work in them or embodying them."⁴⁶

The kind of personhood affirmed in confessional poetry began to rankle a group of more radical poets who saw sincerity as an example of bourgeois privilege. A tenured poet was still part of the university bureaucracy; a father getting in touch with his feelings still represented patriarchy; a white man in therapy was still white and a man. What would gradually become known as identity politics began, in part, as a critique of confessional poetry's fetish of sincerity. The criticism that the liberal aesthetic leveled against the impersonality of the modernists was now leveled against lyricism itself. Personal voice was important, but who was entitled to speak? Authoritarianism did not need to appropriate the voice of the tribe or tradition when whole groups of people and experiences

44 Lowell's "Memories of West Street and Lepke": "Flabby, bald, lobotomized,/ he drifted in a sheepish calm / where no agonizing reappraisal/ jarred his concentration on the electric chair—/ hanging like an oasis in his air/ of lost connections." Originally in *Life Studies*. Here from Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, eds. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 187-88.

45 From "Daddy": "I thought every German was you./ And the language obscene/ An engine, an engine/ Chuffing me off like a Jew./ A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen./ I began to talk like a Jew./ I think I may well be a Jew." A few stanzas later: "Every woman adores a Fascist,/ The boot in the face, the brute/ Brute heart of a brute like you." Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row/ Perennial, 1981), 222-224.

46 Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (London: Penguin, 1978), 338.

were denied the opportunity for self-expression. Snodgrass described his confrontation with this line of criticism as a moment of personal crisis:

On one occasion, I was on a panel with various people, discussing the state of American poetry. Allen Ginsberg and Amiri Baraka started out denouncing most of it. When the moderator asked them what was so bad about American poetry, Baraka pointed at me and said, "He is!" Before I could think of anything to say, Ginsberg and others joined in, and I was being called a reactionary or an elitist or God knows what else.⁴⁷

Snodgrass had trouble responding at the time, but he began to think that it would be significant to "express [...] all that was wrong with American society."⁴⁸ It is to his credit that he took the *ad hominem* criticism of American poetry seriously enough to begin to question himself and his surroundings. He slowly realized that it was not only the Nazis who committed war crimes, and also "I began to notice things in myself that didn't square with what I'd tried to believe in myself."⁴⁹ This moment of self-criticism was, according to Snodgrass, the beginning of *The Fuehrer Bunker*.⁵⁰ Up until this point he had believed that his role as a poet was to protect the sincerity of his feelings from the conformism of society. Now he began to question those feelings and the role they played in shaping society. Perhaps his rebellion had a morally questionable source; perhaps it could lead to unintended consequences.

While this was an earnest response to a perhaps overblown accusation, it was not what his detractors had in mind. Criticizing confessional poetry from a New Left perspective, Ginsberg and Amiri Baraka were not interested in the moral quagmire of emotions so much as the patterns of domination embedded in certain structures of voice. Snodgrass claimed to be speaking naturally, like an animal or a sufferer in pain, when actually he was speaking like a bourgeois father. If his sincerity was ideological or hegemonic, the answer was to speak authentically, which for the New Left meant speaking from an explicit social position, i.e. as a black man or as a Jew. Lyrical voice, in other words, wasn't personal for the New Left; it was the personification of a political or historical situation. The

47 Hoy, 36. Also see the discussion in Gaston, 146-7.

48 Hoy, 36.

49 Hoy, 37.

50 Hoy 36-37, Gaston 146-7.

speaker hypostatized himself or herself as an object because he or she was already objectified anyway; this strategy allowed the speaker to speak as the representative of a disadvantaged group. Ginsberg, for instance, controversially pardoned Pound for his anti-Semitic statements in the name of all Jews. Even non-Jewish poets, such as John Berryman, experimented with writing from the perspective of the "imaginary Jew."⁵¹ This was also the moment when other poets began to write from self- consciously minority positions. Poetry remained anti-social, but it began to shift its voice from the lyricism of personal rebellion to the counter- lyricism of exclusion.

Snodgrass, however, did not understand the problem of authenticity as one of social structure, but as a problem of psychological structure. Heart's Needle was his rebellion against conformity but also against the superego, that part of the psyche instructing him to follow rules. The fateful panel discussion taught him that the feelings he championed in opposition to the social-psychological imperative might be more authoritarian than he thought. Indeed, the whole question of personal rebellion turned into a hall of mirrors. The feelings he presented as sincere might also be said to originate in the dark cellar of the unconscious, which might be hiding its own little Hitler. Snodgrass responded to the Ginsberg-Baraka accusation by first admitting its import and then generalizing its claim to include his accusers. He recognized the possibility of having a Hitler inside of himself, whether understood as superego or id, and then asked if perhaps others did as well. The scandal surrounding Amiri Baraka's anti-Israeli remarks in his post-9/11 poem "Somebody Blew Up America" - "Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed/ Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers/ To stay home that day/ Why did Sharon stay away?" - suggests that he might not have been far from the mark.⁵²

51 See my discussion of both of these incidents in *The Pound Reaction*, 57, 201-19.

52 See the discussion of the controversy in the *New York Times*, September 28, 2002, accessed March 23, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/28/nyregion/new-jersey-laureate-refuses-to-resign-over-poem.html>.

In the Bunker of the Unconscious

In exploring the source and import of deep, unconscious feelings, Snodgrass adopts the familiar avant-garde strategy of provocation. Trilling argues that while sincerity is a form of decorum, implicitly beholden to social norms, authenticity rails against convention: "authenticity is implicitly a polemical concept, fulfilling its nature by dealing aggressively with received and habitual opinion, aesthetic opinion in the first instance, social and political opinion in the next."⁵³ Polemic is the very premise of *The Fuehrer Bunker* and the source of its claims to authenticity. While it is no longer uncommon to write from a Nazi point of view - Jonathan Littell's recent novel can serve as an example here - Snodgrass was one of the first. His dramatic monologues call into question received opinions by showing, in part, that the opinions of Nazis were also received, habitual, and in some instances not far removed from our own. Part of the scandal of the cycle is simply its everydayness. Hitler mentions his love of chocolate cake, Eva Braun her passion for the song "Tea for Two." A host of supporting characters evince personal anxieties, superstitions, and career ambitions that will be familiar to any reader. Goering, in occasional moments of lucidity, even makes himself the butt of his own crude jokes.

Considerations of length prevent me from analyzing the 87 poems that make up the complete cycle. Instead, I will focus on Albert Speer, Goebbels, and Old Lady Barkeep as the three figures most clearly epitomizing the attack on convention - and on sincerity - that I take to be central to Snodgrass' concerns. Speer is the Nazi who confesses his guilt, but he also exemplifies the repression that allows Snodgrass' recognizably human characters to perform their inhuman tasks. In this way he embodies the limits of the confessional project; the authenticity of the cycle consists in showing how his sincere remorse is actually a form of self-deception. Goebbels upholds a certain standard of authenticity because he fully admits, at least to himself, the scope of the destruction unleashed by his lies. However, his authenticity is indistinguishable from nihilism, and if he is honest about lying it is ultimately in the name of the Nothingness he invokes as a devil or a god. Old Lady Barkeep converts Goebbels' nihilism into a series of dirty songs and jokes; the counterpoint

53 Trilling 94.

characteristic of his monologues - official lies vs. private cynicism - takes the form of irony, bathos, obscenity in her limericks. What is repressed in Speer, and cynically embraced by Goebbels, assumes the role of the carnivalesque in Old Lady Barkeep's song.

The most recognizably everyday figure in the poem is Albert Speer. Snodgrass represents Speer as a partially repentant figure who represses painful knowledge while sincerely, but only partially, confessing his guilt. Snodgrass interviewed Speer in Germany in 1972, two years after the latter's release from prison; he was deeply impressed by his contrition but suspected there were parts of the past that Speer simply refused to face. Boswell is I think correct in arguing that Snodgrass was skeptical of Speer's claim to have been ignorant of the scope of the Holocaust.⁵⁴ The poetry illustrates this with a break in the form and content of the Speer monologues. The first three monologues deal with Speer's regrets and his attempts to subvert Hitler's "scorched earth" policy, i.e. that the only way to defend Germany was to destroy it. The poems are composed in unique, right-angled triangular stanzas that mimic architectural structures while providing steps, constructed out of increasing and decreasing line-lengths, and going up or down depending on the orientation of the triangles. But this building-block form is broken in the fourth monologue by lines that seem to trace their way up the page like winding smoke:

What was it
 Hanke saw there in the East?
 And warned me not
 to find out, not to see? What
 are the Russians digging up?
 the sort of things
 I saw in the camps -
 forced labor, wretched conditions ...⁵⁵

This is followed by the partial confession, once again in the right-angled, triangular stanza form: "Time for a cigarette./ He forbids us all to smoke/ then sends us all up the chimney./ (What Chimney? Where?) Idiot, use your/ eyes."⁵⁶ Speer immediately deflects his smoke-like

54 Boswell, 65.

55 Fuehrer Bunker, 96.

56 Fuehrer Bunker, 96; bold and italics in original.

meanderings by turning away from the chimneys of the concentration camps to Hitler's scorched-earth policy, which will leave no chimney standing. His sincerity involves lamenting one historical catastrophe to avoid thinking about the other. The poem finishes by offering a gloss on Speer's own, and on Hitler's, self-imposed blindness: "[he] Knows that I/ neglect my knowing. That he and I, together, we neglect our knowing."

Speer will repeat his injunctions about not-knowing, punctuated by involuntary reflections on the concentration camps, in subsequent monologues. He is obsessed with a knowledge that he refuses to articulate. The poems act out this impasse at the level of form. Indeed, they are a good example of how form can take on the role of the poetic unconscious, acting out what cannot be said through variations of rhyme, rhythm, and shape. The poems encourage readers to become analysts or diagnosticians of what is, in a sense, the body of their text, interpreting formal irregularities as symptoms of the not-known and unsaid. Speer himself points the way in his third monologue when he recounts the story of a friend, a famous cancer doctor, who fails to diagnose his own illness.⁵⁷ We are encouraged to read Speer in the same way he reads his friend. In the context of Snodgrass' own career, this diagnosis of the diagnostician must also be read as the poet reading himself. Snodgrass has realized that *Hearts Needle* was not only a "sad hospital" but a sick doctor. The *Fuehrer Bunker* confronts the sincerity of the previous book, its decorous confessionalism, with the denial implicit in Speer's own confessions.

The confrontation, already announced in the second epigraph to the volume, is embodied by the propaganda minister Goebbels. Goebbels is an anti-poet, a literary figure who lies to deceive the public, but his monologues juxtapose public lies with privately-guarded truths and thus achieve an uncanny or inverted lyricism:

Once, my newscasters would disguise
Each loss as a triumph. Those lies

57 *Fuehrer Bunker* 89.

Were mere truths we misunderstood:
There's no evil we can't find good.⁵⁸

Goebbels believes that he understands the truths behind his official lies. In this case he sees the immanent defeat as a victory, though not exactly as the kind his speeches claimed it would be. Victory, here, is identical to Armageddon. This is because Goebbels' cynical embrace of lying comes at the cost of profound nihilism, which he characteristically externalizes as a historical force or a self-fulfilling prophecy:

Let it all fall in, bum and burst.
Blest be who dares act out his worst
Impulses, give way to the thirst
For blood and show this for the accursed
Inferno we took it for, right from the first.⁵⁹

The poem, which intersperses Goebbels' reflections with excerpts from a religious song from the Thirty Year's War, culminates in a prayer to nihilism:

Our Father who art in Nihil,
We thank Thee for this day of trial

58 Fuehrer Bunker, 17.

59 Fuehrer Bunker, 18.

And for the loss that teaches self-denial.
Amen.⁶⁰

Goebbels, unlike Speer, accepts the truth behind his lies. The moral of the story seems to be that systematic lying leads to an evil that ends up destroying even itself. Hannah Arendt's notion of the "absolute" or "radical" evil invented by totalitarianism offers an appropriate gloss to this passage: "Totalitarianism strives not toward despotic rule over men, but toward a system in which men are superfluous."⁶¹ Goebbels is not interested in people at all; he will repeatedly claim "I loved only the holes in things."⁶²

But while Goebbels' nihilism is sincere it is also deceptive. His negative has a positive that it depends on while refusing to acknowledge. Goebbels' distortion of the Lord's Prayer is actually an allusion to a similar travesty in the famous Hemingway story, "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" (1933), which culminates in a prayer to nothingness in Spanish: "Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada."⁶³ If Goebbels' cynical embrace of lying leads to nothing, it depends on the something of literary tradition to articulate its "holes." Goebbels, for instance, is not only linked to Hemingway but to Shakespeare's most famous villain Iago.⁶⁴ Deconstructing his own final birthday tribute to Hitler with a series of ironic - but private - glosses, he borrows Iago's words to refuse speaking:

Now, when their little throats get cut,
I say, demand me nothing. What

60 Fuehrer Bunker, 18.

61 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest/Harcourt, 1994), viii-ix, 457.

62 Fuehrer Bunker, 115.

63 Ernest Hemingway, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Scribner's, 1987), 291.

64 Fuehrer Bunker, 101.

You know, you know; what you've heard, heard.
Henceforth, I never will speak word.⁶⁵

Of course he does speak again, and even this brief moment of silence consists of repercussions or echoes of one of the most famous scenes in English drama. His final final words, this time invoking another Shakespeare play, attempt to transform literary allusion into a metaphor for immortality or potency: "The rest is silence. Left like sperm/ In a stranger's gut, waiting its term,/.../They'll believe in us when we're dead."⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Goebbels seems to be saying too much about silence; his monologues demonstrate how the said returns, like a stutter in reverse, as that which cannot be completely repressed by the unsaid.

Goebbels is authentic in the sense that he embodies what Speer represses, but he is also sincere about silence. It is this positive side to his nihilism - his belief that silence will live on to impregnate future generations and his need to invoke silence in a literary and allusive way - that suggests the symptomatic acting out characteristic of repression. What is being acted out through Goebbels' literariness, I would argue, is his author's own literary past. The various allusions orbit around the moment when Goebbels describes the bunker as "this confession booth/ Where liars face up to the blank truth.// My tongue lashed millions to the knife:/ Here, I'll hold hands with my soiled wife./.../ Here, I'll read stories to my daughter/ Then hack off all relations, choose/ Only the Nothing you can't lose."⁶⁷ It is difficult not to read this as commentary on the confessional poet's earlier divorce, and on the stories he told (about) his daughter in *Heart's Needle*. The confessional significance of this confessional moment is underscored by the penultimate stanza in which Goebbels calls himself "Prince of Lies" and then adds "Jock of this walk, I turn down all,/ Robbing my Peter to play Paul."⁶⁸ This could be read as another commentary on an evil so radical - or in this case devilish - that it turns on itself; but it is also the moment when the confessional poet turns on his former lyrical style, changing confessions, as it were, in the

65 Fuehrer Bunker, 101.

66 Fuehrer Bunker, 201.

67 Fuehrer Bunker, 115.

68 Fuehrer Bunker, 116.

same way Saul became Paul. The patron saint of this conversion is the pope of confessional poetry, Robert Lowell, who at one point converted to Catholicism (then back again). His famous "Waking in the Blue" - another hospital poem, but in this case describing a mental hospital - includes the line "Cock of the Walk," which Snodgrass transforms into "jock" (Lowell had been a high school athlete) after introducing the stanza with the words "I deny my cock."⁶⁹ Confessional poetry is castrated at the moment the bunker becomes a confession booth.

It is here that The Fuehrer Bunker moves beyond Goebbels' authenticity by exposing it as yet another form of sincerity. Snodgrass plots the descent into the bunker as a series of concatenated confessions, each one correcting the repressions or limitations of its predecessor. Goebbels articulates what Speer can only act out at the level of form, and Old Lady Barkeep counters Goebbels' nihilism by embodying the literary tradition necessary to articulate it. Boswell, as I have already pointed out, suggests a biological model of language in which cruelty gets passed along like a genetic code. Old Lady Barkeep suggests a positive (and bawdy) model of continuity: humor is passed on as a limerick. The limerick can be understood as a form of impersonal or collective memory. Folk songs, especially crude ones, do not have authors (at least nobody claims parentage) but they are in everybody's mouth. Indeed, folk songs go a long way towards fulfilling Eliot's notion of tradition or Pound's "tale of the tribe." Language may not be comparable to a genetic code, but humor has a life of its own.

The literary tradition embodied in limericks is resilient in the face of cruelty. Old Lady Barkeep is not to be underestimated as a powerful counter-tradition to Goebbels' nihilism. Goebbels, with his endless comments about only loving the "holes" in things, directs his verbal tirades against feminized opponents. He ravishes his audience, whipping them up into an orgy of consent that in turn leads to total destruction, then gleefully abandons Hitler's secretaries to the rapaciousness of the Soviet troops.⁷⁰ Old Lady Barkeep, however, gives it back in kind. The first chorus, sung in her name, attributes the sexualized version of warfare to Hitler: "We'll broil their liver for our breakfast/ And fiy their balls like

69 Fuehrer Bunker, 116; Lowell, "Waking in the Blue," *Collected Poems*, 183-184.

70 Fuehrer Bunker, 101.

bacon!/ If they bite back, the bloody cunts/ We'll bang them on two fronts at once." The immediate response corrects this sexualized fantasy of domination through bathos:

In Old Lady Barkeep's shrunken Rich
 Herr Dr. Goebbels took the mike
 And vowed in his grand style:
 "If it costs all your lives, my dears,
 Our reign will last a thousand years!
 Or twelve-same price. Sieg: HEIL!"⁷¹

The Third Reich lasts for twelve years. Goebbels predicts his nihilism will last forever. Old Lady Barkeep insists that what lives on is humor, which is life-affirming even when its subject is atrocious.

Old Lady Barkeep embodies the joke - perhaps the funniest joke in the collection - that even nothingness has a literary tradition. It is this tradition that gets remembered in *The Fuehrer Bunker*. The poems do not provide us with insights into historical personages. They barely sketch historical events. It's not that poetry diverges from historical fact, though there are plenty of facts that Snodgrass gets wrong. Rather, the poems offer variations on a lyrical theme of sincerity and self-deception that is abstract enough to happen anywhere, to come out of any character's mouth.

Perhaps the lyrical structure of the monologue is simply not suited to representing a complex historical situation like the defeat of Nazi Germany. Perhaps we should not expect it to do so. Snodgrass' poems tells us something about history, but it is the history of English literature, and more specifically about the history of American lyricism, which Snodgrass experienced first-hand. His critics called his earlier poems

71 *Fuehrer Bunker*, 15.

reactionary. *The Fuehrer Bunker* suggests that the lyrical form, understood as a dramatic monologue, is always reactionary, which is to say repressive. However, the joke is on the critics. Snodgrass gives Old Lady Barkeep the final word, which she rhymes with "ruin": "While humans prowl this globe of yours/ I'll never lack for customers./ By the way, how you doin'?"⁷²

This long deferred response to Snodgrass' accusers is worth remembering. Indeed, *The Fuehrer Bunker* as a poetry collection is worth remembering. Many of Snodgrass' poems are quite sophisticated. Those depicting the plight of the Goebbels family, with wife and children trying to cope with the father's lies, turn to complicated forms like the villanelle and sestina to dramatize conflicts that defy easy explication. This is, as Snodgrass claimed, the best of his writing. It explores the politics of American poetry by taking seriously a charge always in the air - that of political reaction. The fight is one he took up courageously but lost. In his exploration of political reaction, he pushed the lyric into the bunker of the unconscious, and the poets who set the political tone for their generation turned instead to explorations of identity. We tend to forget that lyricism has a political history, one that deserves to be excavated.

Conclusion: Disentangling Memories

The history of the midcentury American lyric is, in a sense, a history of memory. This is because the lyric personalizes history (for political reasons), privileging voice as an antidote to the impersonal and collective totalitarian threat. Goldstein describes Snodgrass' approach in *The Fuehrer Bunker* in this way:

Snodgrass has grafted the habits of identification between speaker and reader implied in the confessional poem onto the narrative of history itself. Hitler never quite turns to the reader to declare, "Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère," but Snodgrass achieves a constant frisson by locating the source of identification in the lower nature we have privileged, at least since Freud, as the seat of our being.⁷³

72 *Fuehrer Bunker*, 202.

73 Goldstein, 254.

Hitler does not have to turn to the reader because Old Lady Barkeep ends with "you," forging the transference identification, not between daughter and reader or analyst and reader as was the case in Heart's Needle, but between Nazi and reader. But what history is being told here? In a sense Old Lady Barkeep personifies memory as it is supposed to work in this cycle. Any reading of The Fuehrer Bunker as an example of memory-work would have to focus on her parody of the Nazis and its relation to her flaunting of convention. Boswell might not be far off when he claims, "In the volume, poetry becomes the principle by which language is salvaged from political and ideological processes that had threatened to overwhelm it: a recovery that is portrayed as the necessary precondition for cultural, political and personal regeneration."⁷⁴

However, we would be wrong to confuse Snodgrass' lyrical gambit with the survival of poetry or language as a whole, as Boswell seems to do in the same passage. This would be to take a particular lyrical structure, with its own particular political and therapeutic history, and blow it up into an abstract historical truth. Old Lady Barkeep would know how to deflate such an abstraction, even though she herself is an abstraction: a poetic structure that projects its own humor as a historical constant in the same way Snodgrass' Goebbels projects his nihilism as historical Armageddon.

The Fuehrer Bunker is not a memory of the Holocaust, and may not even tell us much about memory per se, except how it tends to personalize history, psychologize it, sometimes confusing provocation with memory-work. Perhaps Snodgrass' psychological portraits of the Nazis were ahead of their time, perhaps under certain circumstances they continue to provoke; but they also show, through their irrelevance to the historical record, both the strengths and the limitations of the psychological approach. Snodgrass insists on making history personal, but his poetry produces a kind of disembodied memory that finds its ultimate expression in the haunting voice of Old Lady Barkeep. Her final apostrophe - it might even be called an interpellation - posits "you" as the empty space of history, ready to be filled no matter what the particularities of personality or event. This empty space is the reconstructed bunker, open to visitors. The way to determine its relation to history is to see who pays

74 Boswell 63.

the ticket price and steps inside. In this case the tourists are American - American poets to be precise.

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