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Nazis in Auschwitz: Reflections on Anglophone Perpetrator Fiction

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Abstract: This article considers the various ways in which the topographies of Auschwitz are used as a symbolic means of articulating particular kinds of guilt in fiction relating to the Holocaust. To do this, I analyse three primary examples: John Donoghue's *The Death's Head Chess Club* (2015), Martin Amis' *The Zone of Interest* (2014), and Dalton Trumbo's unfinished novel, *Night of the Aurochs* (1979). These texts, I argue, employ the complex spatial dynamics of the site in order to address important questions of power, agency, and moral ambiguity. More specifically, such imagery reveals a spectrum of complicity that, without exonerating those responsible for the genocide, suggests the need for a more nuanced understanding of the Holocaust and those that were responsible for its implementation.

Keywords: Holocaust; perpetrator; Auschwitz; Nazis; Amis; Donoghue; Trumbo

This article considers the spatial imagery employed in fictional representations of Auschwitz perpetrators. It does so by examining three Anglophone texts: John Donoghue's *The Death's Head Chess Club* (2015), Martin Amis' *The Zone of Interest* (2014), and Dalton Trumbo's unfinished novel, *Night of the Aurochs* (1979). The critical literature surrounding representations of Holocaust perpetrators has increased sharply in recent decades. Preceding most of my own work on the topic,¹ important studies by the likes of Erin McGlothlin, Sue Vice and Jenni Adams, Robert Eaglestone, Stephanie Bird, Petra Rau, Susan Suleiman, and Becky Jinks have helped shape the field.²

The fiction that forms the basis of most of these studies depicts, in various ways and with varying degrees of success, the basic humanity, normalcy or banality of the perpetrator figure. Putting aside the two-dimensional portrayals that proliferate in the realm of popular culture, the works that make up this body of 'perpetrator fiction' push back against the idea that Nazis were some kind of other-worldly evil, an aberration on the landscape of Western civilisation; they do so by revealing their commonality, subjectivity or comprehensibility. Because of this tendency, academic studies—including most of those listed above—have tended to foreground issues of reader-response, empathy and identification, showing both how the subjectivity of the perpetrators is depicted, and how connections between the reader and the protagonist/narrator/perpetrator are simultaneously established and undermined.³

The present article adopts a different approach. Drawing on the so-called 'spatial turn' in Holocaust Studies, it considers the connections between space and culpability as they are outlined in fictional accounts of Auschwitz. The most notorious concentration and extermination camp in the extensive Nazi camp portfolio has a complex spatial history. Following the Nazi occupation of Poland in 1939, Heinrich Himmler ordered the construction of the camp in the Spring of 1940. Initially, the intention was to support the mass arrests of Polish prisoners but, over the four and a half years of its operation, the site evolved significantly, both in purpose and design. The changing nature of the site is clearly outlined by Peter Hayes, who writes:



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The camp's populace had a primarily "Polish phase", a brief and abortive "Soviet phase", and, finally, a predominantly "Jewish phase" (the onset of which coincided with the inclusion of women), as the installation's original driving purpose of political "pacification" (1940) widened to encompass exploiting an enslaved labour force (1941) and mass murder (1942–1943). (Hayes 2003, p. 331)

In order to facilitate this constant repurposing and remodelling, the camp was developed expansively. Adding to the primary site located in the small Polish town of Oświęcim (Auschwitz I), the killing centre located at Birkenau, several kilometres away (Auschwitz II), was opened in 1942. The forced labour camp at Auschwitz-Monowitz (Auschwitz III) opened later that year. In all, the site became the centre of more than forty satellite camps spread across upper Silesia and beyond. The three central terrains of Auschwitz (Auschwitz I, II, and III) reflected different aims, from incarceration (Auschwitz I) to forced labour (Auschwitz III) to mass murder (Auschwitz II), though it is clear that these primary objectives shifted over time and in response to wider historical and political forces.

The spaces of Auschwitz can be further broken down into different areas and topographical features, including (for example), the selection ramp, the boundary areas (gates, fences, watchtowers), the areas populated mostly by the victims (toilets, barracks), and the ever-looming spaces of death (crematoria, gas chambers). Some of these areas have become recognizable emblems of the genocide, 'familiar staging posts [that anchor narrations] of the Holocaust within an expected pattern' (Jinks 2016, p. 35). To understand the spatial dynamics of Auschwitz is thus to acknowledge that it was not a homogeneous environment. Rather, as Tim Cole notes, the site was 'made up of a complex series of micro-sites at which [returning] survivors enact different rituals and adopt different roles' (Cole 2013, p. 104). Topographical studies of the area must therefore take into consideration the plural and ever-changing nature of individual spaces, as well as their symbolic function in postwar memorial cultures.

It is also important to note that these spaces were far from neutral. Understanding the concentration camp as 'a distinctive system of power' (Sofsky 1997, p. 13)—one that 'metamorphosed from a locus of terror into a universe of horror' (Sofsky 1997, p. 5)—Wolfgang Sofsky writes:

The ordering of coercive space is not merely a material fact; at the same time, it generates social and symbolic significations. Consequently, an analysis of space must provide more than mere topography: it must explore social functions, trace human movements, and endeavor to render the symbolic meaning of the sites in space intelligible'. (pp. 47–48)

The sociological and biopolitical consequences of concentration camp spaces are at the forefront of Sofsky's analysis. For him, the Nazi camps represent the 'most extreme form' (Sofsky 1997, p. 8) of bureaucratized power, a power that was absolute, existing outside the borders of society as a 'closed universe' at 'the far extremity of the social world' (Sofsky 1997, p. 14). The spatial organization of Auschwitz was thus central to the implementation of the Nazi project, which was itself fundamentally rooted in dynamics of power and oppression.

These ideas are also picked up in an important study by Anne Kelly Knowles, Tim Cole, and Alberto Giordano, who note that environmental features 'were essential to the implementation of the Holocaust and inseparable from people's experience of it' (Knowles et al. 2014, p. 2). Here, too, the authors acknowledge that Auschwitz was constituted of various 'spaces of power' (Knowles et al. 2014, p. 164). It thus becomes clear that the experiences of the victims of the Holocaust were defined by the power structures that were in turn reflected in the geographical layout of the camp spaces.

The purpose of this article is to consider the complexities of these areas as they relate to the representation of agency and culpability in fictional accounts. Auschwitz emerges as a trope across the gamut of Holocaust literature. Indeed, the spate of Auschwitz-centred novels that have emerged in the last decade attests to the disproportionate focus on the site in the Western imagination. There are numerous reasons for this centrality, including

the relatively large number of survivors when compared to other sites associated with the Nazi genocide and the fact that it entered the cultural imaginary immediately after liberation, with recordings and photos taken by the liberators being broadcast around the world (McGlothlin, forthcoming)⁴. By contrast, there is a relative dearth of attention paid to other sites of the atrocity, including and perhaps even especially the *Aktion Reinhard* camps, Belżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka, which Erin McGlothlin has provocatively termed ‘the heart of darkness in Auschwitz’s ravenous black hole’ (McGlothlin, forthcoming). This is not to say, however, that ‘other’ Holocaust spaces are entirely absent in works written in Western European and Anglophone contexts, as S. Lillian Kremer reminds us, ‘Americans who treat the Holocaust terrain directly, more often set their works in major ghettos and labor camps rather than concentration and death camps’ (Kremer 2013, p. 134). Nevertheless, the cultural significance of Auschwitz as *the* site of atrocity—at least as it is perceived in Western Europe—is hard to ignore. Peter Hayes’s understanding of the camp as ‘the capital of the Holocaust’ is particularly telling in this regard (Hayes 2003).

It is not a coincidence, I think, that the three examples under discussion here were published in the years marked by a steep rise in Holocaust consciousness. If, in the 1970s, cultural engagements with the Nazi genocide were only just beginning to attract attention, by the 1980s, the floodgates had well and truly opened, and the atrocity featured extensively in literature and film. According to Arlene Stein, by this point, the genocide had already become ‘a universal moral touchstone’ (Stein 2014, p. 2). Today, the cultural obsession with the Nazi genocide shows little sign of abating. So, although written in different decades and, in the case of Dalton Trumbo, on a different continent, all three examples were written in a context in which the Holocaust was becoming or had become ‘an unexpected constant’ with a ‘prominence none could have foreseen’ (Pearce 2014, p. 1).⁵ That all three also engage with the symbolic and material nature of Auschwitz is revealing given the site’s undoubtable position as an exemplar of the genocide within the cultural imagination.

While all three works engage with the spatial imagery of Auschwitz, I do not wish to imply that they all work in the same way or even to the same end. In *The Death’s Head Chess Club*, published in 2015, British author John Donoghue uses the various spaces of Auschwitz to articulate graduations of guilt in relation to the various characters whose moral integrity had, in different ways, all been compromised. This includes a discussion of the perpetrators, bystanders, and members of what Primo Levi famously called ‘the grey zone’ of complicity (Levi [1986] 2010, p. 27). Agents that fall within this group were, according to Levi, ‘the rightful owners of a quota of guilt (which grows apace with their freedom of choice), and besides this they are the vectors and instruments of the system’s guilt’ (Levi [1986] 2010, p. 33). If Auschwitz is the infrastructural denouement of the systemic guilt to which Levi here refers, it makes sense that fictional accounts draw on its topographies to underscore the connection between individual agency and the wider social, political, and organizational forces that facilitated morally dubious acts. This idea is also reflected in Martin Amis’s second novel about the Holocaust, *The Zone of Interest* (2014), which forgoes the technical gymnastics of his earlier *Time’s Arrow* (1991) in favour of a narrative that oscillates around the moral ambiguities related to the traditional (and often over-simplified) triad of victim, bystander, and perpetrator. The character constellation depicted here is thus similar to that of Donoghue’s novel, and both texts may be said to use the Auschwitz space as a means of establishing the (perhaps surprising) nuances and complexities that emerge when considering the issue of responsibility in concentration camp settings. In Dalton Trumbo’s unfinished *Night of the Aurochs*, published posthumously in America in 1979, the author is less concerned with the ambiguities of culpability since the protagonist’s guilt is never in doubt, a point that is clearly underscored by a lack of repentance and a dogged and persistent commitment to Nazi ideology. In contrast to the previous examples, Trumbo engages the spatial imaginary of Auschwitz to draw connections between sexuality and Fascism, dramatizing a long-standing motif in perpetrator representations that can be traced at least as far back as the ‘Naziploitation’ magazines of the fifties and sixties.⁶ In so doing, Trumbo draws connections between sex, power, and politics. In the end, he shows

that guilt cannot easily be displaced from the individual to the system (represented most forcefully by Auschwitz); rather, in this case, the camp is shown not as an aberration on the landscape of human civilization, but a logical expression and extension of the human capacity for cruelty.

As Maurizio Cinquegrani has argued, Auschwitz has become ‘a topographical embodiment of the extermination’ (Cinquegrani 2020, p. 147). The texts under discussion here employ the complex spatial dynamics of the site in order to address questions of power, agency, and moral ambiguity. In other words, spatial metaphors are employed as a means of locating the often-complex moral position of the protagonists. The way that this plays out in relevant fictional accounts is the main focus of this article.

1. The Death’s Head Chess Club

John Donoghue’s *The Death’s Head Chess Club* (2015) oscillates around three central characters: Emil Clément, a French-Jewish Auschwitz survivor nicknamed the Watchmaker; Paul Meissner, a former Nazi-turned-priest who worked in Auschwitz, apparently against his better judgement; and Wilhelm Schweniger, a former Nazi propagandist and chess player, who had been denied promotion owing to a physical disability. The three come together at the World Chess Federation Interzonal Tournament in Amsterdam in 1962, which provides them with a chance to swap memories of their experiences in the hope of finding redemption for their various forms of guilt and complicity.

Despite being the most prominent perpetrator in the novel, Paul Meissner is not initially established as the primary antagonist of the story. We first meet him as a priest, recently returned from missionary work in Africa and, as we soon learn, dying of leukaemia. The transformation is not lost on Emil Clément, whose initial cynicism is laid bare: ‘he was wearing the hard of a man of God—surely another trick? If Meissner had turned up wearing his SS uniform, it could hardly have been more shocking. Meissner had been a prince in the kingdom of liars, so this new identity also had to be a lie. No other explanation was conceivable’ (Donoghue 2015, p. 52). Nevertheless, Meissner’s words eventually placate the Watchmaker, who slowly comes to accept his rationale: ‘For me it is too late. The only forgiveness that counts is my own, and after nearly twenty years, I am still unable to forgive myself [. . .] What I hope is that I can help you to understand that the power of forgiveness will bring healing for *you*—not me, not anyone else’ (Donoghue 2015, p. 74). Meissner’s faith in God and teachings about forgiveness are not a means of absolving himself—‘I know that I have God’s forgiveness, but that is not enough for me’ (Donoghue 2015, p. 74)—but rather work to open a discursive space in which the various participants of the Holocaust—often understood in relation to the triangulation of perpetrator, victim and bystander⁷—can come together to revisit the past.

When we first meet Clément, he is conducting a radio interview relating to the chess tournament almost twenty years after the war. Towards the end of the interview, the journalist slips in the question Emil begrudgingly expects: ‘What many of our listeners would like to hear about in your time in Auschwitz’ (Donoghue 2015, p. 7). Pushing further, he goes on: ‘In your book you wrote that you did not believe that any German who lived through the war could be untainted by what happened in the death camps. Guilt by association, you might say’ (Donoghue 2015, p. 8). Clément responds: ‘You want a good German? Let me tell you, I saw none. Not one’ (Donoghue 2015, p. 8). Just a few pages later, it is revealed that Clément is set to play Wilhelm Schweniger in the first round of the chess tournament; thus, the game is set to position the survivor of Auschwitz against Clément’s bad German; as Lijsbeth Pietersen—one of the tournament’s organisers—laments, ‘[the press are] going to have a field day’ (Donoghue 2015, p. 12). Despite this initial positioning of Clément versus Schweniger, the game fails to live up to expectations: ‘[Clément’s] victory caused uproar. Schweniger’s defeat had been accomplished in less than an hour’ (Donoghue 2015, p. 41). The novel thus displaces Clément’s simplistic notions about German guilt. With Schweniger swiftly and easily defeated, space is created for Clément to confront his true opponent: Paul Meissner. Meissner’s insistence that ‘[he] is

a fan of chess, though [. . .] not much of a player' distances him from the kind of direct confrontation Clément experiences with Schweniger and casts him in the role of a casual observer (Donoghue 2015, p. 50). This takes on particular resonance as the novel continues, and Meissner's complex complicity at Auschwitz becomes clearer.

Indeed, Meissner fulfils a complicated function vis à vis his role in the camp: he is seen to contribute to the violence in only the most passive of ways and appears an unenthusiastic participant in the events that unfold. In this, he is one of several characters under discussion here that complicate the notion—so often seen in popular cultural references—of the perpetrator of the Holocaust as a straightforward symbol of evil; these characters certainly exist, but they are often supplemented by depictions of characters whose apparently reluctant participation in the genocide exposes the various nuances associated with the figure of the perpetrator. This is not to undermine the notion of guilt; as Raul Hilberg asserts: '[the perpetrator] realized, however, that the process of destruction was deliberate, and that once he had stepped into this maelstrom, his deed would be indelible. In this sense, he would always be what he had been, even if he remained reticent or silent about what he had done' (Hilberg 1992, p. xi). While not intended to negate the expression of culpability, such representations offer complicated and at times controversial meditations on the theme of perpetration, suggesting differing degrees of involvement, responsibility, and potential for redemption.

In *The Death's Head Chess Club*, these intricacies are most obviously depicted through the topographies of Auschwitz. Auschwitz I and II are the sites most readily associated with brutality and violence. In this context, it is telling that Meissner explicitly declares that he has 'no jurisdiction' in Birkenau (Donoghue 2015, p. 177). Meanwhile, it is at Auschwitz I that Klaus Hustek—the most unequivocal perpetrator of the novel—is given free rein without the interventions of Meissner, which limit his authority in other parts of the camp; it is, for example, in the punishment block of Auschwitz I that Hustek violently beats Bodo Brack—the blockältester and another morally ambiguous character who eventually sacrifices his life. It is also in Auschwitz I that Meissner is put back in his place by his superior officer, when Kommandant Sturmbannführer Bär accuses him of disloyalty and being under the influence of 'an unscrupulous Jew' (Donoghue 2015, p. 346). This scene opens with Bär scratching a pimple, leading to droplets of blood dripping onto both Meissner's transfer request papers and his own tunic, something the Kommandant 'appears not to notice' (Donoghue 2015, p. 345). It is notable that this latter drop occurs just as Bär orders Meissner to have Clément 'liquidated'. Here, blood is associated directly with the thoughtless violence of the Kommandant; Meissner is, once again, both the witness to blood and the protector of the Jews: 'No, sir, I can't do that' (Donoghue 2015, p. 345). Auschwitz I and II are thus the purview of the more violent and aggressive Nazis. When Meissner does enter the space, it is always in a position of relative powerlessness.

Meanwhile, Meissner himself is primarily associated with Auschwitz-Monowitz which, being the site of forced labour, is shown in contrast to Birkenau: 'My responsibility is to keep the armaments factories running, so you could say I am more interested in keeping Jews alive than killing them' (Donoghue 2015, p. 238). In a letter he would later destroy, Meissner claims: 'I tell myself that I am fortunate. I am not in the camp where the killing is done and I am not involved in the brutality. In fact, I am quite insulated from it. But that does not absolve me from the guilt in which I must share because I am here and do nothing to prevent it' (Donoghue 2015, p. 240). Meissner's separation from direct participation, his acknowledgement of his guilt-by-association, and his understanding of the culpability of *inaction* all serve to underpin our understanding of him as a 'grey' character, opening up the possibility of empathy and identification.

When extreme violence does take place in the Monowitz complex, Meissner is still shown to be separate from the actions taking place. For example, during a scene in which Clément's friend Yves is hanged for stealing food: 'The Watchmaker recognises the tall form of Hauptsturmführer Meissner, leaning on his walking stick and looking distinctly like one who wishes he were somewhere else' (Donoghue 2015, p. 194). Meissner is physically

present as one of ‘several SS officers [who] stand watching’ (Donoghue 2015, p. 194). His proximity to the violence and voyeuristic gaze enforce our understanding of his culpability (an understanding he shares, as evidenced above). Yet Meissner is not a willing participant in the events and, more than this, he is viewed by Clément through his weakness: his reliance on the walking stick highlighting his lack of physical power, which maps onto his perceived sense of more general powerlessness.

The novel concludes with Meissner’s death from the leukaemia that had blighted him throughout. On Meissner’s request, his ashes are taken by Clément and Schweniger with Mijneer Kastein, another victim of Auschwitz who owed his life to Clément’s wartime chess playing and who financed the return trip to the camp, to Auschwitz. The return is, from the outset, depicted in spiritual terms: ‘This was not merely a journey; it was a pilgrimage. They would go by train’ (Donoghue 2015, p. 372)/‘This grotto is a sacred place’ (Donoghue 2015, p. 373). At their journey’s end, the ghostliness of the site is foregrounded: ‘ground mists swirls like phantoms around their feet as they walk’ (Donoghue 2015, p. 373). As he enters the camp, Clément wonders whether he will ‘be able to hear the screams of the ghosts who inhabit this place’ (Donoghue 2015, p. 373). The Auschwitz site thus becomes a marker of liminality, a space where Agamben’s ‘remnants’ come to the fore (Agamben 1999); as Bülent Diken and Carsten Bagge Laustsen note: “‘Remnant’ is a messianic concept that expresses that which cannot be destroyed, a residue of the past that refuses to disappear. Or, in Kertész’s words: “the ghost of Auschwitz”” (Diken and Lausten 2006, p. 84). Auschwitz thus becomes a space that connects the survivors with the dead but also brings together the victims and perpetrators in a shared history of genocidal violence.

This is most fully articulated when Meissner’s ashes are scattered over the site as Clément recites the *Kaddish*, something to which Kastein objects: ‘Not for him. I cannot say *Kaddish for him*’ (Donoghue 2015, p. 375. Italics in original). Before playing a final commemorative game of chess in Auschwitz, Clément reveals the reason behind Meissner’s wish: “‘Meissner was a changed man”, Emil says. “He said that he could think of no more fitting place on earth. He said he would spend eternity asking for forgiveness”” (Donoghue 2015, p. 375). On the one hand, this conclusion underscores the spiritual dimension of the space. At the same time, it reinforces Meissner’s place as part of the complex moral system of the camp: he ends his life by taking his place among the victims in whose murder he played a part while simultaneously acknowledging the inseparable distance between them. He cannot free himself of guilt but shows his understanding of his life as indistinguishable from his actions during the war. In this, Donoghue appears to conform to Diken and Laustsen’s view that “‘The spirit of Auschwitz’ is [. . .] neither incarnated in those who died of gassing nor in those who survived, but in the bond that exists between them’ (Diken and Lausten 2006, p. 84). At the same time, the book ends by affirming Hilberg’s observations regarding the indelibility of perpetration in this context, as noted above.

2. The Zone of Interest

Like *the Death’s Head Chess Club*, Martin Amis’s *The Zone of Interest* oscillates around the stories of three main protagonists: Szmul, a Hungarian Jew and member of the Sonderkommando, camp Kommandant Paul Doll, and Golo Thomsen—a Nazi bureaucrat responsible for the construction of the Buna factory whose connection to Martin Bormann—his uncle—imbues him with an important sense of power and status in the early stages of the novel, but who later becomes involved in subversive activities against the Nazi regime. Paul Doll’s wife, Hannah, is another important character, though one whose point of view is obscured until the final pages. While these four characters seem to conform to a similar victim/perpetrator/bystander dynamic as *The Death’s Head Chess Club*, the subject positions are at times more complex; indeed, with the exception of Paul Doll, all of the characters occupy a morally ambiguous place—Szmul as a member of the Sonderkommando, Thomsen as an opponent of Doll who does not participate in direct action against the Jews but who nevertheless plays an active role in the camp, and Hannah as both the

wife of the Kommandant and a bystander of events. Erin McGlothlin reads the imbalance of perpetrator/victim perspectives as a central feature of the novel's ethical tapestry:

The doubling of the narrative voice of the perpetrator with the perspectives of Thomsen and Doll, along with the inclusion of Szmul's perspective, works to create an imbalance, forcing the reader to focus more particularly on the nuances of one side of the spectrum, namely, on the differences between Thomsen and Doll. The novel's center of gravity [. . .] is situated between these two perpetrator-narrators, producing the dynamic that allows for readers' identification [with Thomsen]. (McGlothlin 2021, p. 289)

In this, McGlothlin (rightly, if perhaps unknowingly) argues against Ahmed Badrideen's positioning of Thomsen alongside Szmul as part of Primo Levi's 'grey zone of collaboration'. He writes:

With the awkward and embarrassing figures of Szmul and Thomsen (a victim who is not quite a victim, and a hero who is not quite a hero), Amis scrutinizes figures whose ambivalent resistance invites ambivalent judgements. (Badrideen 2017, p. 312)

The moral complexities of the various characters are represented at least partly in spatial terms. The title of the book—*The Zone of Interest*—implies an important topographical dimension. It is notable, therefore, that the setting of the camp is, for the most part, depicted in very pragmatic terms; with relatively few exceptions, the reader is given only sufficient detail to know where the action is taking place. One important exception to this is Paul and Hannah Doll's garden. The duality of the site is highlighted from the beginning: 'it was a space divided in two' (Amis 2014, p. 12). Beyond the borders on one side, partially obscured by a willow tree, are the low outbuildings of the camp. On the other side, an idyllic garden with 'rich beds, the striped lawn, the white fence' (Amis 2014, p. 12), beyond which one can see the 'Monopoly Building' and 'the first pink smears of sunset' (Amis 2014, p. 12). The garden is thus a space that shows glimmers of the horrors of the camp on the one side while pointing to a more natural beauty on the other. It is notable, then, that it is here that members of the Sonderkommando—themselves exemplars of Levi's notion of the grey zone—bury their hastily written testimony. It is also in the garden that Hannah and Golo first converse, and where Hannah hides her contraband cigarettes. The garden may thus be understood as a site of subversion and the kind of ethical duality associated with the grey zone. This reading is confirmed when Paul takes Hannah—now openly smoking a cigarette—into the garden, where he intends to have Szmul murder her. In a final act of subversion, Szmul opts to kill himself instead: 'With this I prove that my life is mine, and mine alone. On my way over there I will inhumate everything I've written, in the Thermos flask beneath the Gooseberry bush. And by reason of that, not all of me will die' (Amis 2014, p. 270). The garden thus reads as a metaphor for duality, subversion, and the enactment of individual agency, even if this agency is severely limited.

If, as I have argued, the garden is a space that reveals the complexity of 'grey' behaviours, the 'meadow' is used by Amis as a means of showing the inverted relationship between life and death in the camp. The meadow is the euphemistic name given to the place where the bodies of the murdered are buried, and thus the vibrancy of the pastoral imagery is juxtaposed with the death that bubbles beneath its surface. Paul Doll admits: 'I uneasily realised that I could actually *hear* the Spring Meadow. Said meadow began perhaps 10 metres beyond the mound [. . .] but you could hear it. You could smell it, of course; and you could hear it. Popping, splatting, hissing' (Amis 2014, p. 65). He goes on to say: 'I looked out on a vast surface that undulated like a lagoon at the turn of the tide, a surface dotted with geysers that burped and squirted; every now and then divots of turf jumped and somersaulted in the air' (Amis 2014, p. 66). The personification of the meadow turns the space into a living, breathing entity, which contrasts sharply with the extinguishing of life that has created it. Moreover, this description ensures that the meadow connects to a wider motif in which space is connected to smell: 'I trudged through the

rubble of the synagogue, followed the curving, dipping lanes to the flat road, and entered the Zone of Interest, getting closer and closer to the smell' (Amis 2014, p. 260)/'when I see you, I'm there again. When I see you I smell it. And I don't want to smell it' (Amis 2014, p. 298). This motif draws attention to the way in which space is experienced through the senses; the site is not externalized but, rather, experienced through the body.⁸ The contours of the camp are thus intricately connected to corporeal encounters, both in relation to the destruction and abjection of the bodies of the murdered, and in the sensory reality of those living within its borders.

The spatial dimension of Auschwitz takes on a broader symbolic function with Szmul's description of the camp as an 'extraterritorial space' (Amis 2014, p. 80). This perspective is advanced by three of the four central characters. Szmul says:

Once upon a time there was a king, and the king commissioned his favourite wizard to create a magic mirror. This mirror didn't show you your reflection. It showed you your soul—it showed you who you really were. [. . .] I find that the KZ is that mirror. The KZ is that mirror, but with one difference. You can't turn away'. (Amis 2014, p. 33)

Paul Doll says something remarkably similar:

And it's true what they say, here in the KL: No one knows themselves. Who are you? You don't know. Then you come to the Zone of Interest, and it tells you who you are. (Amis 2014, p. 68)

And Hannah Doll follows suit, in the only section narrated from her point of view:

Under National Socialism you looked in the mirror and saw your soul. You found yourself out. [. . .] Who somebody really was. *That* was the Zone of Interest. (Amis 2014, p. 285)

The idea of the Zone of Interest as a mirror of the self is thus expressed by three of the central protagonists. The message seems to be that the Auschwitz space is connected to the human occupation of that space. It is not about the camp as a topographical system but as a means of exposing the human capacity for cruelty. The topographical marker 'Zone' is thus employed metaphorically as a means of articulating the ethical 'placement' of the self within the wider infrastructure of genocidal culpability. In this, Amis alludes to the inescapable connection between space and power that is evidenced in Auschwitz, as discussed previously.

This reading becomes particularly important when it comes to the characterization of Paul Doll. Inside the camp, Doll appears inept and usually drunk as, for example, when the Doctors insist on taking over his duties at *Selektion* because his actions have begun to cause chaos: 'According to [the delegation of medical men] I've got "worse" at deceiving the transports' (Amis 2014, p. 173). At home, his relationship with his wife has descended to a series of powerplays and their lack of sexual intimacy further underscores his impotence: 'I can only liken the sensation, when we're alone . . . not to the *aftermath* of sexual failure but to its *prospect*. And that defies all intuition: for the last 8 months, with Hannah, there have been no failures (and no successes)' (Amis 2014, p. 228). This is further reflected in his obsession with Dieter Kruger—Hannah's first love and a committed Communist who is eventually murdered by the Nazis: 'Kruger's fate was the only thing that held any sway over Hannah. In the old days you could even worm the odd martyred fuck out of her, on the strength of friend Kruger. Ach, how far away, now, those ecstatic meldings seem! I miss Dieter Kruger' (Amis 2014, pp. 264–65). Doll's obsession with his wife's former lover hints at his stunted masculinity. The only suggestion of Doll's sexual competency is in his impregnation of Alisz Seisser, a political prisoner totally reliant on his leniency ('[Alisz] knows her place and retreats to it the very instant the Sturmbannfuhrer starts to glower'. (Amis 2014, p. 261)) As Paul reasons: 'they are deeply necessary, my engagements with Alisz Seisser—for how else can I maintain my dignity and self-respect? I of course allude to the appalling conditions that obtain in the Doll villa. Alisz's unfailing gratitude and esteem (not to mention her trills of amatory bliss) form a crucial counterweight to the, to the . . . I

am afraid of Hannah. It takes a certain courage to commit such a sentence to paper—but it's the case' (Amis 2014, p. 227). Doll's affair is thus to be understood as a means of mitigating his wounded pride and proving his sexual capability. Nevertheless, the abortion which Doll forces Alisz to undertake demonstrates his stunted sexuality and exposes the authority he commands over her body. The separation of sexuality and pregnancy is further underscored in Doll's subsequent interaction with Alisz: 'I said, "stop it. Stop it. You're pregnant . . . get off"' (Amis 2014, p. 224). Doll's relationship with both women is figured in terms of the dynamics of power that define them; any sense of typical human connection is thereby undermined.

Thus, within the confines of the Zone of Interest, Paul Doll is characterized by his impotence and ineptitude, his only power remaining over Alisz Seisser. Yet, outside of the camp, Doll's fantasies of violence are evident:

I was soon wondering if I would ever again be able to attend a mass assemblage without my mind starting to play tricks on me. It wasn't like the last occasion, when I became gradually immersed in the logistical challenge of gassing the audience. No. This time I at once imagined that the people behind me were already dead—already dead, and recently exhumed for immolation on the pyre. And how sweet the Aryans smelled! (Amis 2014, p. 191)

The fact that his murderous fantasies take place outside of the camp shows that, while the Zone of Interest may act as a mirror revealing the true selves of those within its perimeter, for Paul Doll, his capacity for cruelty extends beyond the camp grounds and beyond Nazi ideology, extending to the "Aryan" citizens around him. By detaching Doll's murderous tendencies from the site of Auschwitz, the novel undermines his insistence that he is 'a normal man with normal feelings' (Amis 2014, p. 65).⁹ Such claims of ordinariness fall flat when considered in relation to Doll's twisted sexual relationships and fantasies of murder that take place outside the Nazi infrastructure.

3. *Night of the Aurochs*

Dalton Trumbo's *Night of the Aurochs* remained unfinished at the time of the author's death in 1976. The book consists of ten supposedly completed chapters along with Trumbo's notes, chapter synopses, and letters. The story focuses on Ludwig Richard Johann Grieben, an unrepentant former Nazi living in the small German village of Forchheim. It is particularly noticeable that here, unlike in *The Death's Head Chess Club* and *The Zone of Interest*, Trumbo presents an image of a man whose ideological alignment with Nazism provides the reader with an uncompromising portrayal of genocidal culpability.

Much like Amis's description of Paul Doll, the novel is primarily concerned with showing the interlinking of sexuality and power. In this, Trumbo is following a long tradition of writers and critics who have acknowledged the erotic allure of Nazism. Susan Sontag, for example, writes: 'Hitler regarded leadership as sexual mastery of the "feminine" masses, as rape. (The expression of the crowds in *Triumph of the Will* is one of ecstasy; the leader makes the crowd come)' (Sontag 1975). As I have argued elsewhere:

Sex therefore functions as a mechanism of, and a metaphor for, political power; its use (and abuse) in these texts strays from normative sexual conduct and eroticism becomes enmeshed with a corresponding political abnormality. The hierarchical structures that are created through these sexual expressions of power further reinforce the victim/perpetrator binary and thus remind the reader of the corruption of these practices in the context of Nazism'. (Pettitt 2017, p. 41)

The first hint we get of this fusion is in Grieben's childhood, when Grieben abuses his friend and neighbour, Inge. Seeing her urinating in the garden one summer evening, Grieben uses his knowledge as a kind of power, first insisting that she 'carry through the action [he] had interrupted', before coercing her into letting him touch her (Trumbo 1979, p. 51). When, after several secret meetings, she attempts to refuse him, he resorts to blackmail: "'I'll tell how you let me look at you and touch you. I'll tell your sisters. I'll tell your father'

(Trumbo 1979, p. 53)—‘From that moment forward Inge was altogether mine’ (Trumbo 1979, p. 54). The abuse only comes to a halt when Grieben pushes the limits of his power too far and attempts to share his ‘prize’ with his friend, Gunther. When Inge begrudgingly begins to strip, she reaches for a rock and throws it at Grieben before running off, thus ensuring the latter’s punishment, but not necessarily his remorse.

That Grieben does not grow beyond his need for power in his sexual relations is evidenced in his relationship with Liesel, a Jewish ballet dancer whom he has arrested in order to take full control over her at Auschwitz. The power dynamic at work here is similar to the one we see between Paul Doll and Alisz Seisser in Amis’ *The Zone of Interest*. According to Trumbo’s notes, ‘the pornographic fantasy of the child becomes a terrible reality of the man. What was completely innocent in Grieben the boy turns Grieben the man into a killer’ (Trumbo 1979, p. 157). The relationship begins with Grieben’s rejection: ‘He begs her to sleep with him; she refuses. He begs her to become his mistress; she refuses. He begs his wife for a divorce; she refuses’ (Trumbo 1979, p. 104). The scene ends with Grieben dragging Liesel to the park and attempting to rape her; like with Inge before her, the attempt fails and Grieben ejaculates prematurely, allowing her to run off. This failure with Liesel encourages Grieben to take sexual charge in his relationship with his wife: ‘In the course of his infatuation with Liesel, his new treatment of his wife. No more underpants. Her pussy must always be available to his touch, his hand. The first thing he comes home. Any time. Even once in church’ (Trumbo 1979, p. 106). As with Paul Doll, sex becomes a means of establishing and asserting power in the face of rejection. It enforces a gendered hierarchy of control that maps onto Grieben’s actions at Auschwitz, a position he considered ‘God-like’ (Trumbo 1979, p. 158).

The relationship between sex and power reaches its peak in Auschwitz: ‘The only power that still remains to her is choice, the power to decide whether she will go to the ovens and certain death or to Grieben and a chance for life. [. . .] She knows, in short, the risk she accepts in staking her love of life against Grieben’s love of death’ (Trumbo 1979, p. 132). The link between Grieben’s love of power, sex, and death is underscored by the language employed to depict the surroundings: ‘Their struggle for survival continues for eighteen months as the war and the ovens of Auschwitz-Birkenau roar to a mutual climax’ (Trumbo 1979, p. 133). The murderous topography of Auschwitz is thus depicted in the language of sex, implying a darkly Freudian connection between Eros and Thanatos, life and death. This is further exemplified when Grieben’s wife gives birth to a daughter, who he names Liesel. On the one hand, this demonstrates the extent to which Grieben’s wife’s position as a woman of the house has been subverted and perverted by the sadistic fantasies of her husband:

The longer death moves hand in hand with his possession of Liesel, the wilder his infatuation becomes. When his wife births a baby girl he names the child Liesel so that he may utter the beloved name openly in his own house and freely adore it in the presence of his son, his daughter, his wife, and the Witnesses for Jehovah who are his servants. When the child dies three weeks later, he is inconsolable save for the comfort of Liesel’s arms in the house of death, which has become their trysting place. (Trumbo 1979, p. 134)

That the child dies in infancy further underscores the links between life and death that the novel centralizes.

It is telling, then, that the sexual politics of Grieben’s powerplays are reflected in the representation of Auschwitz itself. In a way that is reminiscent of Amis’s depiction of the meadow in *The Zone of Interest*, Trumbo draws additional connections between life and death in his description of Grieben’s family home, which sits on the outskirts of the camp:

Grieben lives with his wife and teenage children in a cottage outside the camp [. . .] a cottage with flower and vegetable gardens, fertilized each week by materials he brings home from the camp—fertilizers which produce gigantic flowers and three-kilo turnips. Even the camp’s great smokestacks, which day and night becloud the sky, sprinkle the hop vines beside his cottage door with

a gentle residue that nourishes their vital functions and impels them to larger and much greener growth than vines from the same seeds planted only ten miles distant. (Trumbo 1979, p. 108)

The flowers and vegetables that grow in the garden are nourished through the murder of victims of the camp. Indeed, the fertilizer creates produce more vital than those grown elsewhere. Life is thus supplemented with death; fertility is linked to murder.

A further link between death and sex is established in Grieben's postwar fantasy of Anne Frank, which Trumbo outlines in an undated letter to his close friend, Mike Wilson. Upon discovering the German translation of Anne Frank's diary while in prison, Grieben initially dismisses it as a forgery. Later, he comes to accept the validity of the work and believe 'that he *knew* this fifteen-year-old child at Auschwitz, and that while she was there he *helped* her, and that in the course of helping her she began to *love* him. And he her' (Trumbo 1979, p. 157). Trumbo goes on to explain that Frank 'comes to him at night as a sexual fantasy of *perfect sex*' (Trumbo 1979, p. 158). Anne Frank is clearly associated in the cultural imaginary with her death: the prescience of her diary contrasts with its abrupt halt and the vacuum left behind following her deportation and murder. Trumbo underscores this association when he connects her to Liesel: 'When [Grieben] is 65 [Frank] comes to him as a woman of 34, always loving him, always forgiving him, and then when he is 68 and his beloved Frank is 37—the age at which Liesel died in Auschwitz—she dies in his bed. He buries her in the woods outside Forchheim near the point where he killed the squirrel while a boy, just as he buried Liesel in the woods outside Auschwitz' (Trumbo 1979, p. 158). As Trumbo writes in his letter to Wilson, what he is after here is 'the sexual, political and mystical fuck up which seems to [him] to be inherent in the history of the German people' (Trumbo 1979, p. 158).

When Grieben returns to Auschwitz in the years following the war—a trip inspired by his fantasies of Anne Frank—his mental state has changed significantly: 'Almost suffocated with the melancholy of self-pity, with nostalgia for the glory and pain of all that has gone from the world, he embarks—an old man, lost, alone, the last bearer of a faith betrayed—on a pilgrimage to Auschwitz' (Trumbo 1979, p. 141). What he finds there is a far cry from the sexual arousal he experienced in his youth:

There, on a chill Autumn day, he ascends a small rise that looks down on the deserted camp. He stares at the barracks, row on row; the abandoned headquarters buildings; the rubble which once loomed above the sky as gas chambers and crematoria, from which no smoke now rises; the desolation, the loneliness, the accursedness of the site which once provoked emotions never before known to men. (Trumbo 1979, p. 141)

The site reflects Grieben's sense of power and worth. It is an extension of him, providing an outlet for his own fantasies of power and abuse. Far from being a space that dictated the actions of an unwilling contributor, Auschwitz functions as the culmination of his own innate desires, desires that were in evidence long before the Nazis came to power. Returning as an old man without the strength or power to dominate, the camp now reads as a reflection of his sterility, incapacitation, and alienation. This form of representation returns guilt to the site of the individual and away from the structures of power: Auschwitz and the wider Nazi infrastructure.

This reading is developed in Trumbo's notes, where the smokestacks of Auschwitz are symbolically rendered as giraffes: 'Thus it was that night as I knelt on the hillock in the gray twilight of Auschwitz. The giraffes were grazing. Smoke poured from their ears, and their cheeks glowed red as their teeth ground hot bone to ash. Lifted their heads, regarded the horizons, calmly continued their grazing' (Trumbo 1979, p. 178). Far from the typical rendition of Auschwitz as a modern scar on the landscape of civilization, Trumbo here paints a picture of Auschwitz as a foreign yet natural part of the environment. Grieben is part of the scene; he is at one with the exotic landscape in which he finds himself, which is simultaneously depicted as natural and yet out of place. Likewise, the gas chambers are shown to merge with the natural world: 'Day and night the inmate bands celebrate

the rites of selection while the echoing gas chambers fill and empty and fill again and the ovens devour their predetermined quotas, blackening the sky by day, reddening it by night' (Trumbo 1979, p. 133). Trumbo thereby debunks the notion of Auschwitz as a separate universe, existing outside the moral standards of the civilized world. Instead, the Holocaust is shown as part of the organic world—an altered one, to be sure, but nevertheless within the sphere of the 'natural'. This implicitly suggests that the actions of the perpetrators should also be understood as part of the spectrum of primordial human behaviours—certainly distorted, but not outside the realm of human capability either.

4. Conclusions

This article has attempted to show the various ways in which the topographies of Auschwitz are used as a means of articulating complex notions about guilt, agency, and responsibility. Moving away from the simple understanding of the Auschwitz perpetrator as somehow embodying an otherworldly essence of evil, the topographical metaphors employed by these three authors demonstrate the nuances associated with individual culpability. More specifically, such imagery reveals a spectrum of complicity that, without exonerating those responsible for the genocide, suggests the need for a more nuanced understanding of the Holocaust and those that were responsible for its implementation.

Today, the Auschwitz site is caught among history, memory, and myth. It has an important historical presence, a site that can be visited (and is visited, rightly or wrongly, by vast numbers of interested parties, tourists, and students every year). By comparing the material traces and topographical features of what remains with documents and maps of the wartime period, academics have learned a huge amount about the Nazi organizational structure and the shifting priorities of the party. At the same time, as a metonym of the Holocaust and a global symbol of atrocity, the site is often reduced to its most familiar reference points, adopting a symbolic function that extends beyond the bounds of historical analysis and into the cultural sphere. By placing Nazi perpetrators into the space most commonly associated with their crimes, authors begin by making an ostensibly straightforward connection between Nazism, murder, and guilt. However, by turning the geographic complexity of the site into a metaphor for moral conduct—be that in relation to the ambiguous behaviours associated with the grey zone, creating degrees of severity of culpable acts, coding relationships of power or agency, or articulating the human impulses that led to the genocide—these writers are able to complicate simplistic notions of right and wrong, challenging readers to comprehend the complexities of the moral crisis that defined the Nazi period.

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Notes

- ¹ E.g., *Perpetrators in Holocaust Narratives: Encountering the Nazi Beast* (Pettitt 2017) and 'What is Holocaust Perpetrator Fiction?' (Pettitt 2020, pp. 360–72).
- ² For full-length studies, see especially: *The Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator* (McGlothlin 2021); *Representing Perpetrators in Holocaust Literature and Film* (Vice and Adams 2013); *Our Nazis: Representations of Fascism in Contemporary Literature and Film* (Rau 2013). Other important works include: 'Empathy Identification and the Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction' (McGlothlin 2016, pp. 251–76); 'Avoiding Evil in Perpetrator Fiction' (Eaglestone 2011, pp. 13–26); 'When the Perpetrator Becomes a Reliable Witness of the Holocaust: Jonathan's Littell's' (Suleiman 2009, pp. 1–19); 'Cultural Codes: Holocaust Resonances in Representations of Genocide Perpetrators' in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies* (Jinks 2019, pp. 332–42).
- ³ Jinks' 'Cultural Codes' is an exception, here. Focusing on 'mainstream' representations, Jinks explores the ways in which the Nazi stereotype has been employed in representations of 'other' genocides.
- ⁴ For further information, see Erin McGlothlin, 'Representing Treblinka', article forthcoming (McGlothlin, forthcoming).

- ⁵ For further discussion of Holocaust consciousness in Anglophone settings, see especially: Pearce (2008, pp. 71–94); Arlene Stein (2014).
- ⁶ See especially Susan Sontag (1975); Dagmar Herzog (2005); Elizabeth D. Heineman (2002, pp. 22–66); Charlotte Mears (2019, pp. 193–210).
- ⁷ For further discussion of these categories, see Raul Hilberg (1992).
- ⁸ For more on the importance of the senses, see Wachsmann (2021, pp. 27–58).
- ⁹ In this, he echoes the claims of Rudolf Höss, the historical Commandant of Auschwitz on whom Doll was based. See: *Commandant of Auschwitz* (Höss 1959).

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