

**“THIS IS OUR ARMAGEDDON”:
BERLIN IN POSTWAR AMERICAN FICTION**

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ABSTRACT

This article surveys American literary responses to the U.S. bombing of the world's then-fourth largest metropolis, Berlin. Such total devastation of a European city had never been seen before in recent history, and had never been so extensively recorded by photography. Discussed in the article are techniques of shifting viewpoints, of grammatical complexity and metaphors used to describe the mythic quality of Berlin's destruction, and the almost mythicizing attempts to make textual monuments of destruction itself, from the immediate postwar years into the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS

Apocalypse, Armageddon, Berlin, Postwar American Fiction.

**“ESTE ES NUESTRO ARMAGEDÓN”:
BERLÍN EN LA NARRATIVA ESTADOUNIDENSE DE POSGUERRA**

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora las respuestas dadas desde la literatura estadounidense a los bombardeos aliados de la que era entonces la cuarta ciudad más grande del mundo: Berlín. En la historia reciente, ninguna ciudad europea había sufrido semejante devastación, ni había sido tan fotografiada. En este artículo se abordan técnicas como los cambios del punto de vista, la complejidad gramatical y las metáforas empleadas para describir la cualidad mítica de la destrucción de Berlín, así como los intentos casi mitificadores de levantar con los textos monumentos de la destrucción misma, desde los años inmediatamente posteriores a la guerra hasta el siglo XXI.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Apocalipsis, Armagedón, Berlín, narrativa estadounidense de posguerra.

Though he had heard, as a schoolboy, of the historical destruction of great cities, wrote German journalist Siegfried Kracauer in 1931, the transformation of vast stone walls into empty space seemed impossible in his own time. "How," he mused, "could these train stations, these avenues of businesses, these whole endless stone masses one day cease to stand?" Such impermanence was unimaginable. Berlin, like London or Paris, was considered indestructible and, as a child, Kracauer wrote, he never doubted for a moment that the tales of campaigns and cremations rustling up from the pages of history were but myths (1996: 57, my translation)¹. "From the ruins of Athens rise the spires of Berlin," a deadpan voice in John Hawkes's *The Cannibal* would echo a popular nineteenth-century refrain, now made ironic less than a generation later (1949: 177).

Even before the war's end, Michael Young had already imagined Berlin's ruins for American readers. In his *The Trial of Adolf Hitler* (1944), an Austrian-American protagonist imagines the "blasted and ruined" Tiergarten, this "ploughed-up park," now "silent as the grave," beyond which Unter den Linden stretches: "charred debris, rubble," while "[a]rrogant" Wilhelmstrasse, "the political heart of Germany" lies "blackened and humbled, prostrated in the dust [...] in a dull red glow not unlike the twilight of the Germanic pagan gods" (1944: 116), signaling a return to myths unimaginable in Kracauer's time. In Young's novel, the Reich Chancellery is now "begrimed by smoke and soot," its windows "burned-out hollows," rooms gutted, scorched and water-stained: not even these "walls of Valhalla had been spared. But then, what power had the gods of Valhalla left them? The Nazis had not realized [...] the time for such gods was past!" From below echoes an "angry, guttural raving" (1944: 117), coming from Hitler, sitting "[f]ar down a vista of this stupendous [underground] apartment," drinking champagne while awaiting capture (1944: 118). If, as Young imagined, the Chancellery itself was in ruins by the time Americans arrived, his futuristic visions may not have missed the mark by as long as Kracauer, yet missed it, all the same. For American soldiers in 1945 arrived in Berlin to find not the embodied nexus of the evil they had

¹ "Wann immer in der Schule von der Zerstörung einstiger Weltstädte hörte, so schienen mir diese Schreckensereignisse heute unmöglich. Mit einem ungläubigen Staunen las ich auch das Gedicht von Chider, dem ewig jungen, der nach aber fünfhundert Jahren dort, wo früher ein gewaltiges Stadtgebiet sich gedehnt hatte, auf verödetes Land stieß. Wie, diese Bahnhöfe, diese Geschäftshäuseralleen, diese ganzen endlosen Steinmassen sollten eines Tages nicht mehr bestehen? Ich konnte mir ihre Vergänglichkeit nicht ausmalen, hielt Paris, Berlin und London für unverwüstlich und zweifelte keinen Augenblick daran, daß jene Kriegzüge und Einäscherungen, von denen die Geschichte uns meldet, nur noch wie Sagen heraufrauschen" (Kracauer 1996: 57).

fought to conquer, but instead a confused, confusing and nearly unmarked landscape, where Berliners were more likely to treat them as friends than as foes, and where their allies now seemed to regard them as enemies.

To journalists and authors visiting or describing the city decades later, Berlin in 1945 often seemed, like W.H. Auden's city in "Memorial for the City" (1949), "a space where time has no place." Thomas Pynchon imagined the scene in 1945 as "an inverse mapping of the white and geometric capital before the destruction [...] except that here everything's been turned inside out. The straight-ruled boulevards built to be marched along" now wind mazelike through piles of rubble, civilians "outside now, the uniforms inside," while "[s]mooth facets of buildings have given way to cobbly insides of concrete blasted apart." In this world where inside has become outside, "[c]eilingless rooms open to the sky, wall-less rooms pitched out over the sea of ruins in rows," and "men with their tins searching the ground for cigarette butts wear their lungs on their breasts. [...] Earth has turned over in its sleep, and the tropics are reversed" (1975: 372-73). Above the ruins "of an ancient European order" (1975: 436) even the stars have become so disorganized that it's "possible [...] to make up your own constellations" (1975: 366), and when the protagonist of Joseph Kanon's *The Good German* wonders why peace negotiations are being held in Wannsee and not "somewhere nearer the center," an American soldier replies, staring in surprise, "There is no center" (2001: 11).

Albrecht Thiemann and Heinz Ickstadt have described typical American renditions of post-bombing Berlin as offering signs "of sensory emptiness, a bare surface under which no coherent order, no integrating structure, no moral or political certainty appears (1987: 77-78, my translation). As Derek Gregory writes, "spatial structures cannot be *theorized* without social structures, *and vice versa*, and [...] social structures cannot be *practiced* without spatial structures, *and vice versa*" (1978: 121). While Pynchon's destroyed Berlin has been evoked as the ultimate smooth space², earlier American fiction set in occupied Berlin takes up similar themes, as well, often at greater length and with a slower pace. If invaded Berlin is "a death landscape" (Thiemann and Ickstadt 1987: 77) or, as U.S. general Lucius D. Clay put it, "a city of the dead" (Steege 2007: 20), the world's fourth largest city, having been hit with more bombs and shells than any other in the Second

² See, for example, Hanjo Berressem's *Pynchon's Poetics* (1993), Joseph Conte's *Design and Debris: A Chaotics of Postmodern American Fiction* (2002), or Brian McHale's "Pynchon's Postmodernism" in the *Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* (2012).

World War (Steege 2007: 20)³, was indeed left with seventy percent of its area destroyed (Richie 1998: 531). Yet several American authors chronicled the life going on in its ruins during the early occupation, as Americans and Berliners connect or collide in a smoothed space with boundaries and routes left largely undefined.

Dos Passos was the first well-known fiction writer to visit and describe Berlin in his chronicle *Tour of Duty*. Moving toward the city, Dos Passos crosses a threshold made almost symbolic as his train enters Potsdam: "we crossed a canal choked with a tangle of broken bridges." Beyond Dos Passos's canal of broken bridges "moved long mansarded buildings pitted with shellholes, eighteenth-century facades torn and scaled like discarded stage scenery, smashed cupolas and belfries, pushed in pediments, snapped-off chimneypots at the gable ends of shattered slate roofs" (1946: 313). Description of the destruction becomes an adjectivized, metaphored list of incongruous juxtaposed architectural elements unbound by sense or relation. Later, roaming Berlin's streets to meet "bundled-up Germans bringing home their bunches of sticks and splintered laths for firewood," Dos Passos wonders how he could "ever get any notion of what was going on in that immense centerless pile of ruins that stretched for so many miles in every direction" (1946: 318-19). Berlin left him "with a feeling of nightmare that was hard to define" (1946: 315), its citizens "degraded beneath the reach of human sympathy" (1946: 324). Driving "past the shattered university and the heaps that had been Friedrichstrasse and the empty spaces where a little of the shell of the Adlon still stood," finding the Brandenburg Gate "oddly intact," and staring though it "over the waste, punctuated by a few stumps of trees and a few statues, that used to be the Tiergarten," he likens Berlin's ruin to America's natural wonders, "so immense it took on the grandeur of a natural phenomenon like the Garden of the Gods or the Painted Desert" (1946: 319). If American metaphors for the sublime were to be found in the city's ruins, sixty-one years later, meanwhile, "post-apocalyptic Berlin," in at least one case, would be likened to lower Manhattan after the terrorist attack of 2001 (Filler 2001: 28).

Americans over the next decades would continue to attempt panoramic descriptions of the destruction wrought on the city by their own bombs. William Gardner Smith's *The Last of the Conquerors*, published three years

³ 65,000 tons of bombs and 40,000 tons of artillery shells were being reported in American newspapers in 1945 (cf. "Berlin Worst Bombed City in All History." *Ellensburg Daily Record*, June 9, 1945, p. 3).

after the war's end, presents a surprisingly pastoralized summertime Schöneberg of wide, cleared streets and vegetable gardens, in which the rising summer odor of decaying human bodies beneath its rubble is mentioned almost as an afterthought. Seven years later, Thomas Berger's more typical ode to a young American soldier's experiences suggests a landscape of felled phallic trees, vaginal gates and prostrated ruins. "*Berlin*, it was to be Berlin," rhapsodizes Berger's protagonist Reinhart on learning he is to be stationed there, for the city is "a horse of a different hue from mere Germany" (1955: 51), with "its acres of forests and ruins" (1955: 212), its "Brandenburg Gate and Unter der Linden trees; and acres of famous blonde pussy, whom twelve years of Nazism had made subservient to the man in uniform" (1955: 50).

Like Dos Passos's descriptions of this fragmented landscape, Berger's are fragmentary and often tangled, favoring long, disjointed phrases windingly linked with semi-colons and hyphens. His task is more difficult than Dos Passos's journalistic approach, for he must weave from these fractured images a narrative. In both Smith's and Berger's novels, the simple lack of "imageability"⁴ in Berlin in the wake of its bombing leaves it a landscape without landmarks. Areas of the city are fairly indistinguishable from each other, leaving the city mainly imagined as paths, largely self-made, individualized routes between the U.S. military base and the club, the meeting point, the lover's home (in Smith's novel) and the fallen forest (in Berger's). Three clearly distinguished points form the main markers: the (suburban) army base and two poles at either end of it, Wannsee (often symbolically linked with America or with plans to return to America) and the ruined city.

In Berger's opening scene, German history is confused with American, as a statue of Frederic the Great is taken for a "Revolutionary War hero" (1955: 9) ("representing the best, or the worst, of one tradition or the other", 1955: 10) and urinated on by the protagonist – an ambivalent gesture, as it turns out, for Reinhart is a U.S. soldier of paternal German ancestry, making his gesture perhaps one of denigrating Germany, perhaps America, perhaps simply a way of marking his own territory somewhere in between, but in any case illuminating Berlin's remaining monuments as a curious gestalt of German and American with few links to any moral scale, however ambivalent. The building where Reinhart lives and works likewise has "no rhyme or reason." It is impossible to "tell what function it had served before the Fall; it may have been the only place in Germany where one could hide from the Gestapo, or perhaps on the other hand was a Gestapo-designed labyrinth

⁴ The term is borrowed from Lynch (1960: 9).

through which their captives were permitted to wander free and moaning, madly seeking nonexistent egress" (1955: 56). Berger's American soldiers have taken over a space whose own original intents remain unknown, unmapped, perhaps even nonsensical, and whose current functions remain equally ambivalent. A foreboding that Berlin's destruction marks the fall of America's own capitalist idealism increases as further west, on "a strip of Wannsee shore near a wrecked pleasure pavilion," is "a tin Coca-Cola sign hanging crazily [...] the patented slogan of its own Internationale in German," while "downtown" stands "the red and gold standard of Woolworth's in a similar death-agony of capitalism" (1955: 25). In "the now deranged nerve center of Hitler Germany," a "great chaotic plaza" spreads "before the ruined Chancellery" (1955: 212), while the Reichstag, "surmounted by a dome of chicken wire," faces "a park of weeds" (1955: 214-15). Amid this scenery of the wreckage of both American and German symbols, Reinhart sets out to write "a plan for Sunday guided tours of the Nazi ruins" (1955: 51), in effect to make sense of them for visiting soldiers on leave and American civilians on tour, to narratize this fragmented world and to narrow its distances, meanwhile seeking traces of his own father's family in the ruins. If images of wealth were often linked to images of paternal ancestry in earlier Berlin stories, here images of ruined wealth appear as Reinhart prowls through Wannsee's "deserted mansions" already "looted by the Russians," but with "sufficient evidences of the genteel life: sunken bathtubs in washrooms big as stables; roofed terraces of tile, for dancing; genuine oil paintings; one home had an iron portcullis which at the instance of an electric switch ascended from the basement to guard the door. The houses were in that intermediate state of ruin asking for more" (1955: 64) – and so Reinhart, rationalizing that they were owned by Nazis, vandalizes them, then wonders if he, too, isn't a sort of Nazi, reflecting uneasily on the fact that his paternal grandfather was a native of Berlin.

Reinhart's worries over his unsettling attacks on material wealth are assuaged as he comes closer to Schild, his communist American companion with a similar German name. Of Schild Reinhart asks, as the two cling to the side of a mountain of rubble, making their way through the city,

'There's something about Berlin that gets you, isn't there?'

'Me?' asked Schild.

'That gets a person, I mean. [...] It always used to have an evil ring – also awesome and faraway, like "Mars" or "Jupiter." But here it is, and it is real. Strange to say, I just realized I love it.'

'Because it is broken,' said Schild.

'I guess so. All the crap has been blasted away, leaving something honest' (1955: 315).

This apocalyptic city is, like “apocalypse’s” own meaning, a revelation through destruction. And while Schild’s unwillingness to mourn with Reinhart over a city of broken images, entangling both American capitalist and Nazi symbols, indicates Schild’s acceptance of this communal brokenness as a place to begin a new world order rejecting both, as Myron Simon has written, “[a] large part of Reinhart’s ‘craziness’ in Berlin is provoked by his awakening from an adolescent dream of German history ‘to see the terrible landscape of actuality’ (p. 47)” (1995: 104) – a landscape with which he senses a connection through heritage, now made both impossibly complex and distanced. For Reinhart, finally, the revelation is of his own immeasurable distance from what seems on the surface impossibly close, as if its breath could be felt in a void. “Distances elsewhere standard, in Berlin were triple,” writes Berger, and Reinhart, making his way through the city “[c]rossing Kronprinzenallee at last,” seeing “where someone had chopped down a tree in the Grunewald,” walks in to sit “on the fallen trunk” (1955: 329). The forest long symbolizing the city is itself in ruins, dismembered as much as Reinhart’s own family tree has been, as castrated as Cronus dismembered by his son. This certainly allows for “smooth space” in such novels, but it is some form of “striation,” however whimsical, that seems longed for, for Berlin’s “smoothness” finally only lengthens distances between Reinhart and his various destinations. Unable to reconnect with his German roots in Berlin, Reinhart finally takes revenge on a German contact (ironically named “Schatzi”) who was unhelpful in Reinhart’s search for his family members, turning Schatzi in to the police just as Schatzi himself is trying to escape Berlin for America. Whether Reinhart himself stays on in Berlin is left unclear, and the novel closes at Tempelhof Airport, “a mess of cracked-eggshell buildings” (1955: 373).

Eight years after Berger’s novel, both themes of a placid post-apocalyptic idyll and of revenge for the loss of one’s paternal ancestry dissipate. Stronger lines were drawn between U.S. and Soviet influence in the city and emphasis was put on a clean ideological separation between the U.S. and Berlin, as Leon Uris’s *Armageddon* launched itself in an apoplexy of hyperbole, as if to make up for his tardiness in arriving at the site of the bombed Berlin⁵. “This is no ordinary city,” Uris is repeatedly at pains to point out. Berlin “is our Armageddon” (1985: 441), “a city that had undergone more damage at the hands of man than any single place on earth,” where “a hundred thousand dead civilians lay beneath the mountains of brick” (1985: 230), its “beautiful beautiful” streets now “a rubbish pile” (1985: 217). Uris’s novel is the first to

⁵ Uris himself served in the South Pacific during the war.

take the dramatic viewpoint of Berliners themselves during the Soviet invasion, as their city burns and crumbles around them. Here, horrific scenes unwitnessed by American eyes are animated in a sort of scopophilic pornography of violent verbosity, in which "[r]ivers of blood spilled into the gutters," while "[s]izzling bridges collapsed into the Spree and the Brandenburger Gate was riddled to a sieve; the castles and Reichstag smoldered" and factories "crumpled under the short flat hiss of cannon and the incessant tattoo of machine guns, grenades, and mortars" (1985: 229). Uris's most graphically violent scenes depict those involving invading Russians themselves, rather than British or U.S. aerial bombardments.

Amid this destruction, images of a felled phallus are mingled with those of a dying woman. Berlin, "worse than dead," is a "great, beautiful goddess hacked up, prostrate, gasping for breath [...] the last of life's blood oozing from her body"⁶. An elderly stooped man becomes the focalizer, trudging "down the Unter Den Linden, that mammoth boulevard that rumbled under the wheels of Prussian cannons, clicked under the heels of genteel ladies, heard the shouts of protesting workers, the gunfire of insurrection, the boots of pagan rallies," where now "ragged men stagger and fall into the streets" while "women barter." At the Brandenburg Gate, where "the Quadriga of Victory once had her chariot drawn by four lusty steeds. The chariot had no wheels, the horses no legs; they lay in a heap and a limp red flag hung over the prostrate shambles" while "[g]reat chunks of the massive columns had been bashed away," and beyond them, the "floral wonders of the Tiergarten were ravaged,"⁷ the "Column of Victory [...] dismantled," the "great forests were in ruin," and "the lakes and rivers putrid" (1985: 302-04), at once washed away and with stagnant or putrid waters. Berlin, with its stooped or falling men and columns, its ravaged floral wonders and gasping, oozing goddess, is de-phallicized, ravaged and uneroticized all at once. It has become "too horrible to walk in Berlin any more. The city was a grotesque, surrealist graveyard palled in a gray mist," where the "half lifeless who staggered about were damned and tormented" (1985: 316). "I get sick every time I drive into Berlin" says an America soldier (1985: 309). "Walls of shorn buildings like large fingers" hover over one female German focalizer (1985: 317). We have

⁶ The reference to a slain goddess may come from Howard K. Smith's radio broadcast, in which the journalist made reference to "Berolina," the "goddess of Berlin" (Howard K. Smith. "The Most Massive Work of Concentrated Destruction . . ." Radio broadcast May 9, 1945, Combined American Networks).

⁷ The etymological roots of the word "ravage" indicate a carrying away, particularly by water.

shifted from an anthropomorphization of Berlin as a woman to the first use of German female focalization by a male author.

David L. Robbins's *The End of War: A Novel of the Race for Berlin* (2000), again following a pattern of shifting focalization, this time between advancing Russian soldiers, a Berliner within the city, and American officials in Washington, each viewpoint a textual monument to destruction in itself. Here again the author reaches back in time to dramatize Berlin in the midst of its destruction as no American could have witnessed it. The city is "a moonscape of desolation" (2000: 91), where a mother and daughter, venturing out to cut meat from a dead horse in Savigny Platz, watch the macabre scene of a carnival shop looted by dancing children "trailing colored paper streamers" (2000: 326) – a prelude to the scene when Russians themselves enter the neighborhood on foot. A Russian bomb opens a crater in the street, strewing clothing and bits of human bodies while a horse races away in flames. Viewpoints of American characters themselves are limited to scenes in the U.S. or outside Berlin, with American guilt at Eisenhower's and Roosevelt's not having considered Berlin important enough to attack by land underlined throughout. The novel's final passages offer a half-hearted reconciliation, but also a further condemnation of American strategy, almost as if Robbins regretted that the final battle for Berlin would be between Berliners and Russians, depriving him of better material. Texts like Robbins's and Uris's shift between focalizers in order to take in the grandiosity of Berlin's ruin, and to come to terms with the contrast between the silent, ruined postwar city and the active, horrific, unseen and unseeable act of its destruction.

Meanwhile, American literature overall presents a wild scramble for metaphors to enunciate, elaborate and narrate this "smooth" space. Mark Twain once wrote that the emotions described by "foreign breasts" on witnessing new scenery "*had* to be various, along at first, because the earlier tourists were obliged to originate their emotions, whereas in older countries one can always borrow emotions from one's predecessors" (Twain 1967: 488-89). Yet by 2001 there were enough accumulated images of the bombed city that Joseph Kanon could borrow stereotypes, and even resort to a jibe about the same repeated image of the ruined city as recorded by reporters. Says the driver to the protagonist, an American journalist, as they roll through the ruined city: "Don't bother taking notes. Everybody says the same thing anyway. Lunar landscape. That's the big one. And teeth. Rows of decayed teeth. AP had rotting *molars*. But maybe you'll come up with something original. Be nice, something new" (Kanon 2001: 14). The best Kanon's journalist-protagonist can come up with, evidently, is "cemetery quiet" (2001:

14). Fear of losing teeth (as the Freudian adage goes) may signal fears of castration, and anyone who has gone through Kanon's 500-page novel or seen its film adaptation will recall that the man "buried" in this "cemetery quiet" (still alive in his subterranean hole) is a hidden, now impotent German SS officer-husband. Over his hiding place is laid, like snow to melt, the feminized "lunar landscape" of ruins.

From Berger's unearthly Berlin, "awesome and faraway" (1955: 315) as Mars or Jupiter made here and real, to Robbins's "moonscape of desolation" (2000: 91), to Berger's description of returning to bombed Berlin "like getting to the moon" (1955: 76), to Kanon's "[l]unar landscape" (2001: 14), Berlin becomes a landscape so incoherent that it lies not only outside the sphere of U.S. control or understanding, but outside earth itself – or even outside history. By the late postwar period, Joyce Carol Oates would muse that "Berlin was reduced to rubble and rubble has no memory so you cannot expect a poignant sense of history: and in any case does history exist?" (1984: 109), echoing Kracauer's suggestion that the impossibility of imagining history in the present bends it persistently back into myth.

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