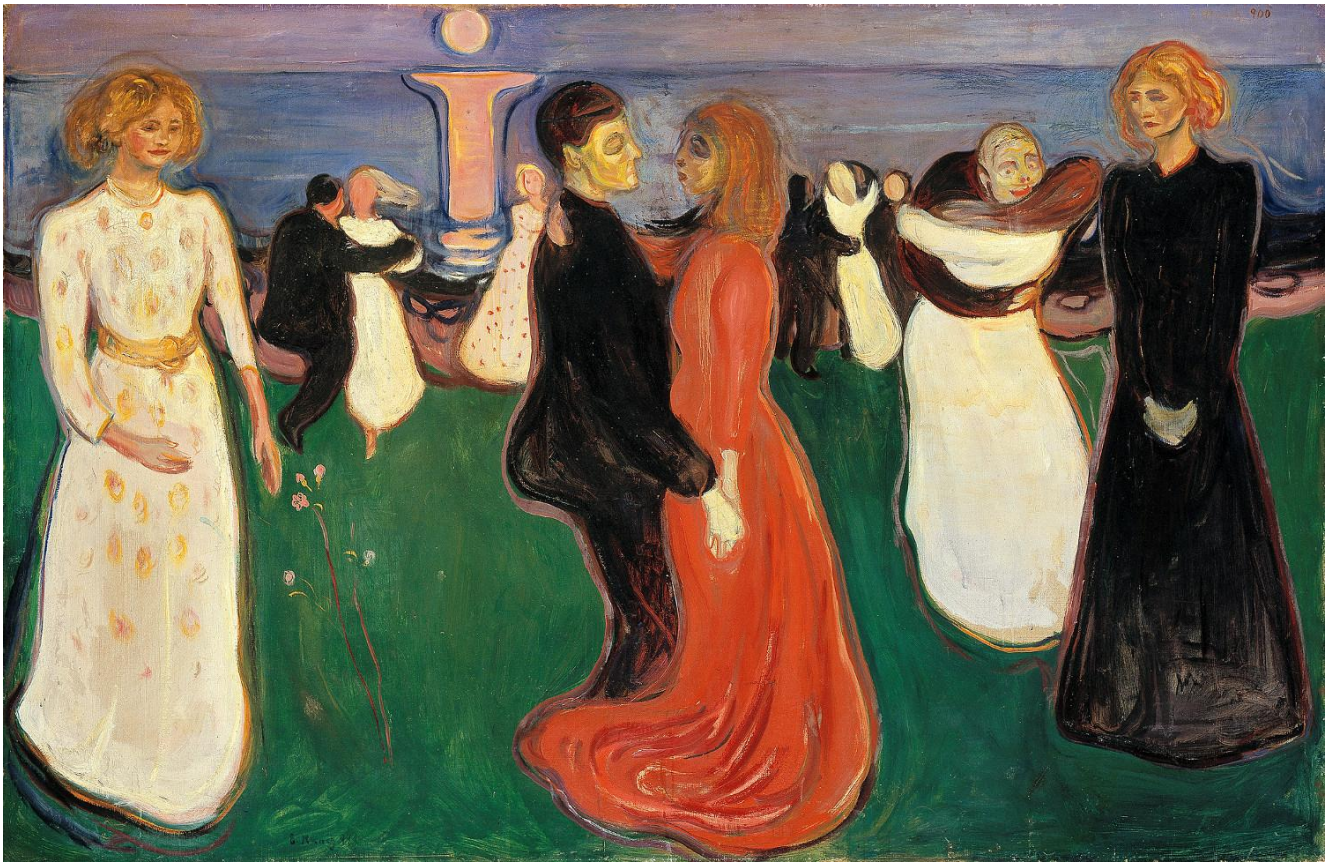
Old Books and Contemporary Challenges

by Samuel Hux (February 2020)



The Dance of Life, Edvard Munch, 1899

I: Lit Crit and Atrocity

"Death is the mother of beauty, mystical," wrote Wallace Stevens in his magnificent poem "Sunday Morning." That has never been *quite* true. Although death, mutability, can make us value things more because we know they must pass, it can also

cast a pale over creation. Further, the possessor of the privileged aesthetic view is usually thinking of the death of other things, other people, not contemplating the certainty of his own. Still, what Stevens said at one time made *some sense.* It makes less sense today, however, and in fact may no longer be true at all, for the meaning of death has been modified by events in our time. In the past we thought of death primarily as a part of the cycle of nature. If murder was common that was . . . well, one of the unfortunate instruments of death, but was still a psychological exception to nature. The present forces us to see that although murder cannot rival the natural cycle in the sheer number of its victims, it is no longer exceptional, and nature is in some qualitative way no longer the norm: We live and die not simply in an age of mortality but of atrocity.

Quite obviously—I suppose it's obvious, given the word *atrocity*—I'm thinking about death in the context of the Holocaust, and, indeed, the sense of reality and possibility which is a legacy of that long moment in the twentieth century. Which is not to suggest that *death* occurs to me only as an intellectual-cultural subject: I am of an age, no longer a spring chicken, so that it pops into my mind as something which may "occur" to me in the most radical fashion. And it's on my mind since I am a kind of intellectual historian long obsessed with how the alteration of its meaning is reflected in historiography, philosophy, and in literature. Freud said during the First World War that we "cannot maintain our former attitude toward death . . . and have not yet discovered a new one" and are consequently forced to live "psychologically beyond our means." Since Freud died before World War II we might say with a little exaggeration he "hadn't seen nothin' yet." But, to get right down to the matter . . .

I have recently been reminded of Theodor Adorno's famous judgment that "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (*nach Auschwitz ein Gedict zu schreiben ist barbarisch*). In many years of teaching philosophy I amused myself collecting silly to just-wrong things said by great philosophers, from Plato's notion that one cannot *intentionally* do evil but only *mistakenly* and without understanding, to Nietzsche's fantasy of the "eternal return,'' but Adorno is the winner-loser by far, making me think he wasn't so great after all. While I understand the despair which Adorno's judgment reveals, it, without its author's intention, awards a kind of retroactive victory to Adolf Hitler.

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However, I think it ought to be said that a great deal of the intellectual response to the Holocaust—and specifically in the case that comes to my mind, *literary criticism* of Holocaust literature—is barbaric, a kind of atrocity. Well, "comes to my mind" is not exact: "has long been on my mind" is what I should say.

For my thinking of the Frankfurt School philosopher Adorno and my revision of his famous sentence reminds me of a book I reviewed roughly forty years ago. I will avoid the title of that book and I shall keep to myself the name of the author, referring to him only as "the Critic," for the following reasons. He is/was a respectable scholar who did much good critical work, including half the book I am remembering; and he is now into his tenth decade and I do not wish to slander the gentleman, hoping I myself avoid slander, especially when

I am older (hoping I get older).

The crucial segment of the Critic's book deals analytically with Holocaust literature, the specifically chosen example being Charlotte Delbo's autobiographical Auschwitz trilogy: *Aucun denous reviendra*, *Une Connaissance inutile*, and *Mesure de nos jours*, the first volume of which was published in English as *None of Us Will Return.* A big theme, obviously, and the size of it, by sheer contrast, reveals the pettiness of most academic criticism. But there are problems—and a major one is that Mme. Delbo was not equal *as a writer* to the task the Critic assigned her as representative Holocaust author. I do not wish to pursue that, for her experience was hell. And I do not want to risk the kind of condescension the Critic sometimes practiced, as when he said of one of Delbo's compatriots at Auschwitz who refused to speak her anguish, "There is something mournful about the 'success' of her rehabilitation: atrocity need not penetrate the façade of middle class respectability." Why cavil about her pitiful attempts to forget? She experienced. We who did not experience have the obligation to remember!

Another problem, at least for me, was a theme that threaded its way through the book: One difference between "private dying" and the "public ordeal of atrocity" is that tragedy has little to say about the latter. "As in most dramatic tragedy, private dying usually represents a limited interference in [human society's] continuity; after a brief or prolonged period of mourning, social order reasserts itself and the individual finds consolation and support in the fact that society survives his personal ordeal unchanged, and welcomes him back into the normal rhythms of existence." That *may* be true of "private dying," although many mourners do not find their way back, but it is an inadequate suggestion of what

literary tragedy is about. Classical tragedy does not presuppose an ordered world to which we return, purged, after the blood is let, although that is certainly a conventional academic view of it. The tragedians, of all people, would be least surprised by our age of atrocity. An undersong of all great tragedy is that there is something fundamentally wrong in the nature of things.

As I read I tried to recall an elegant and precise statement of what I hope the Critic was trying to say, and then I had it—an essay by the Austrian philosopher-journalist Gunther Anders in *Dissent* many years ago: "We have just emerged from a period in which for Europeans natural death was an unnatural or at least exceptional occurrence. A man who died of old age aroused envy; he was looked upon as one who could afford the luxury of a peaceful and individual death . . . Occasionally natural death was viewed in a different light—as evidence of man's freedom and sovereignty, as a twin brother of Stoic suicide—but even then natural death was felt to be unnatural and exceptional. During the war, being killed was the most common form of dying: the model for our finitude was Abel, not Adam . . . In the extermination camps natural death was completely eliminated . . . There the venerable proposition, All men are mortal, had already become an understatement . . . For the truth contained in the old proposition was now more adequately expressed in a new proposition—'All men are exterminable.'"

The book I'm recalling should have been a longish essay and not a book at all. Much of the literary analysis would have to go, but we and the subject could be spared it. Ultimately the book became just another lit-crit exercise, drowning its subject. For example, Mme. Delbo takes a stolen bath in a brook, her first after two months at Auschwitz: "The

rehabilitation of flesh," drones the Critic, "encrusted by the filth of atrocity is an essential step for anyone interested in rescuing the mind from memories of inappropriate death, though once more the first ritual does not guarantee the success of the second. But the bath rite is elaborate, a grotesque ballet of readjustment to life . . ." "Why continue?" as I remember thinking. It is *obscene* (nothing less!) to obscure such a literal, pitiful, and terrible scene with such grad-school seminar cleverness—a minor atrocity in itself.

Some subjects should be off-limits to the critical imagination. Not the Holocaust itself, no, never! Not the history of it; the story must be told and retold, never to be shelved. And the first-person narratives and reflections—Elie Wiesel's novels and memoirs, Jean Améry's *Beyond Guilt and Atonement,* Primo Levi's memoirs and fiction, and unfortunate etceteras—should never be allowed to be out of print. But judgments *of* and *about* the feelings of the survivor-authors should be judged to be barbaric. *Moratorium* is the wrong word: moratoria are temporary.

But perhaps I am too harsh on the Critic. There is such a temptation in academic literary studies to ostensibly "elevate" common actual suffering to literarily interesting symbolic heights, Mme. Delbo's bath more than a bath. And besides, it's been forty years now since I read it, so perhaps I should just calm down.

In *a*ny case, death no longer is the mother of beauty, if it ever was. And Theodor Adorno's seemingly "brave" observation is a greater atrocity than the Critic's critical sins. A post-Auschwitz world with poetry avoided is, as I said before, a

retroactive victory for Hitler. A world without the great Paul Celan, so to speak: something Adorno should have thought about. I judge that after Auschwitz poetry, real poetry, is an absolute necessity. And there's more to say:

I know there is no more painful poem from the twentieth century than Celan's "Death Fugue" (*Todesfuge*). I doubt there is a *more* beautiful one—"your golden hair Margareta / Your ashen hair Shulamith." "Death is a master from Germany" (*Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland*). To make something beautiful even in spite of death—which Celan does in *Todesfuge*—is a triumph over barbarism. But, of course, it did not keep Paul Celan alive.

II: Augustinian Politics

It is of course too late to review a book published in 1979—but not too late to think about, or re-think about it, in a time of special political muddle (if that word comes even close to being adequate). Garry Wills' *Confessions of a Conservative.* "Are you a conservative, then?" William Buckley asked Wills, new contributor to *National Review*, in 1957. "I answered that I did not know. 'Are distributists conservative?'" Buckley said that he had been told that they weren't; but, more latitudinarian than he has ever been credited with being, and famously willing to take risks, Buckley hired the untested young Wills as *National Review* drama critic.

This is my nod toward the autobiographical aspect promised by the title, the most entertaining, least sustained, and ultimately least consequential part of the book. Some readers expressed disappointment that the narrative peters out after Wills's recollections of life at and around Buckley's journal, for which he wrote for ten years after dropping out of a Midwestern Jesuit seminary. His evocations of that ideological, journalistic, and human milieu are masterful, but the book is a confession, a freer form than autobiography, and expectations of sustained narrative are beside the point. This is a confession of ideas and their development. Not many writers now popularly (and, often misleadingly) identified with generally liberal opinion began their careers sponsored by William Buckley and tutored by Frank Meyer and Wilmoore Kendall—and that is the point of the recollections with which the book begins. A strange starting point for someone who considered Richard Nixon an anachronistic believer in nineteenth-century economics (*Nixon Agonistes),* defended social radicalism within the Catholic Church (*Bare Ruined Choirs*), and argued that Jefferson's *Declaration* was a communalist document (*Inventing America*).

Wills saw (or let me switch to present tense since I have no suspicion he's changed his mind to any significant degree) . . . Wills sees the principal characteristic of the American political system, and its principal genius, to be that it does not work the way it is advertised to work. Our electoral democracy amounts to a retroactive sanctioning or rejection of policies and reforms after the fact: Elections do not change things so much as they merely endorse or register disapproval of alterations already made, as the 1936 election approved the New Deal measures that were not even mentioned (as balancing the budget was) during the 1932 campaign. And during the years between public judgments through the franchise it is rarely the elected who are running things or introducing new things

to be run; a number of countervailing elites do that. Chief among these are the business elite; the bureaucratic elite, with its technical expertise; and the moral elite, call it, from William Lloyd Garrison to Martin Luther King—all those who work outside the system and harangue and embarrass. Politicians are an elite, of course, but their function is . . . to be mediocre. "They are an elite that *accomplishes* mediocrity for the common good." With so much to drive us asunder, they are the soporific that helps to keep us together—with a good word for everyone, conflicting commitments, and ideological muddle. It is sloppy and inelegant, but the whole ad hoc arrangement works more often than not. (I agree about the "mediocrity" but am somewhat doubtful about its good effect or its soporific virtues!)

This is not satire, Wills assures us. In fact, although he does not necessarily approve of every particular consequence of it, Wills approves of the arrangement in general. Which should raise a problem and several hackles for people moved by ethical considerations regarding public affairs. Is *Confessions of a Conservative* merely a confession of political cynicism? The answer is No, and the consequences of that form the most important aspect of the book.

But a reader might well ask, "Fine, sounds like a worthy book, but why bring it up now?" To which I answer: First, the best books remain relevant in some fashion or other and therefore should not be allowed to descend into literary or intellectual obscurity. And second, and rather more selfishly I suppose, as 2020 begins I (and some other people, too) need to escape the babble of journalists and the "mediocre elite" and enjoy the speculations of a first-rate intelligence for the sheer sake of one's sanity!

Wills has his heroes and pays them tribute; he makes no pretense that his thoughts are not informed by tradition. Cardinal Newman is one, he who wrote that "satisfaction, peace, liberty, conservative interests [are] the supreme end of the law, not mere raw justice as such." "Conservative interests" does not mean to Wills what it does to *some* conservatives (*putative* conservatives, one might say, "putcons" as I call more-or-less standard Republicans)—modest wages, high profits, and such—but rather those traditional values that keep a society, in all its imperfections, in one piece. Wills has a perfect abhorrence of the individualist capitalist ethic, preferring instead the distributist ethic of another hero, G.K. Chesterton (subject of his first book), although he knows that the distribution of landed property to insure a free and decentralized political life cannot make as much sense today as other forms of distribution of "property": such as the "property right to a job," which Chesterton with his championing of labor guilds approved, and the "property right to services," including medical service. Buckley should have listened to Wills when they first met; then Buckley would not have grown to disapprove of Wills when he had only remained distributist, Chestertonian. Chesterton wrote a wonderfully cranky and entertaining book on Aquinas, portraying Aquinas as a kind of common-sense thinker full of Aristotelian earthiness and free of Platonic nonsense. Chesterton had little use for Augustine. Wills's principal hero, however, *is* Augustine who, his periodic neo-Platonism accepted on the one hand, is on the other not unlike the Newman who had his doubts about "raw justice" on earth.

That Saint Augustine saw little hope of justice on earth is an old story, and a scandal to those who consider his doubts the reflexive Manicheanism of the ex-Manichean. Wills's reading of Augustine, extraordinarily affectionate (I know no other word

to use), has a subtlety hard to capture in summary. “The City of God” (heaven, Jerusalem, etc.) and “the Earthly City” (hell, Babylon, etc.) imply yet a *third* city. (Wills is focusing primarily on the last books of *The City of God,* especially 19). The Earthly City is not coterminal and coterminous with the actual political order of this earth. The Satanic Earthly City and the Heavenly City of God are *ultimate revelations* toward which history moves—but the “earthly with a small ‘e’ is that place where the two final cities mingle on pilgrimage.” Since the earthly order is neither one nor the other, but the scene where the two destinations imperfectly reveal themselves, it cannot be the order of *perfect justice* . . . nor yet that of *perfect injustice*.

There is no warrant for thinking Augustine equates the earthly order with the Earthly City, for while the latter must be the reign of self-love and other—hatred, the former should be and often is, according to Augustine’s definition of “a people,” “a gathering of many rational individuals *united by accord on loved things held in common*” (emphasis added). Wills notes that Augustine objected to Cicero’s definition of “a people”: “a gathering of those *united by agreement on the right and by shared interests*” (emphasis added). The virtue of earthly order is peace, according to Augustine, which often of course compromises the justice implied by Cicero’s “the right.” Absolute justice can mean nothing to Augustine if not the will of God, but who is fit to impose it in the earthly order, since one who might try to impose it cannot know that he is blessed with grace or, if so blessed, that he will retain it? This is what Wills means by “Augustine’s agnosticism about the souls of other men.” “Peaceful union is the nutriment, as it were,” Wills interprets Augustine, “for both wheat and weeds. By ordaining that both should need the same things, God ordained a unity of goal and co-operation between them. His fields nurture both the wheat *and* the weeds, till harvest.”

Thus, peace on this earth means a realistic accommodation of good and bad, violation of the confident hopes of would-be totalitarians left and right.

Wills' Augustinian interpretation is essentially a restatement of a 1961 essay, "The Convenient State," in which Wills contrasted the potentially totalitarian "Order of Justice" with the "Order of Convenience," convenience meaning not mere expedience but a coming together, as in convention, which implies both a gathering and tradition. "Accord on loved things held in common."

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Some will prefer to call Wills liberal or radical, and read his title ironically. Consider, after all, his championing of civil rights activists and anti-war protestors (during the '60s and '70s). But Wills would argue that non-defensive war and racial inequity were not fit objects for conservative veneration. Nor the capitalist ethic, unless one's conservatism is merely right-wing libertarianism or Manchester liberalism given another name. Wills has always had a prickly resistance to easy ideological identification.

"Conservatism looks to possession—but to the *common possession* (Augustine's *concordi communion)* of a language, a history, a concrete set of loyalties; to possession in the large sense as what links countryman to countryman; not to property in the narrow sense of individual possession, that which one holds apart from one's fellows . . . We do not agree on everything

with everybody, but *we agree to as much as we can* without doing positive violation to our soul's higher density."

But . . . yes: the communalist rhetoric, the distributism; there is something here which, given the prevailing American understanding of "conservative" (politically "right-wing," whatever that means precisely), suggests that although Wills is not being merely verbally ironic, he is trying to force upon his readers certain ideological ironies. One such is the common ground *traditionalist* conservatives often share with some varieties of the democratic left and not with their own nominal co-ideologists. And there's an attendant irony we might consider. Liberals have often been oddly forgiving of communists—remember communism as "liberalism in a hurry," remember "anti-anti-communism"?—while conservatives and the old social-democratic left have been almost obsessively consistent in their contempt for Communist pretensions. A moderate social-democrat might applaud three-quarters of what Wills has to say in his confession of conservatism.

A philosophical view of politics makes some partisan divides look foolish.

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