

On Robert Priseman and the Possibility of Painting

'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.'
Theodor W. Adorno (1949)ⁱ

This famous remark by Adorno has been frequently quoted by other writers on the Holocaust – so frequently that, as Yvonne Kyriakides has pointed out, it has come to resemble a political sound-bite, a maxim endlessly repeated without, in the majority of cases, any serious attempt to explore its implications or situate it within the context of Adorno's thinking more generally.ⁱⁱ In fact, Adorno's seeming interdiction of 'art after Auschwitz' – that is, the idea that all the arts, not just poetry, can scarcely dare to engage with or appropriate this kind of subject-matter without risking the moral philosopher's stern censure – touches on a much wider range of issues including whether it is possible to memorialize the Holocaust at all and, if so, how one might go about that task.

The advent of peace in Europe in 1945 revealed in all its horror the extent of the human tragedy that had unfolded as a direct consequence of the Nazis' murderous delusions. Yet even concentration camp survivors themselves failed to agree on what should happen to the physical evidence of all this suffering and death, once the period of post-war reconstruction had begun. Some argued passionately that what remained of the camps should be preserved at all cost, lest we forget the enormity of the crimes committed by the Third Reich. Others, equally passionate, insisted that these obscene stains on an innocent landscape should be expunged as quickly as possible. One can see why they disagreed. For many people, the act of preserving something is equated with a kind of dedication in which emotions such as love, admiration and reverence are all mixed up in hard-to-disentangle proportions. When we say that a painting or a historic building has been 'preserved for the nation' or 'preserved for posterity', these kinds of unspoken feelings are often in our minds. We 'lovingly preserve' mementoes handed down to us by our parents and grand-parents: objects or trinkets whose sentimental value, together with the memories they evoke, far outweighs any considerations to do with monetary worth. It seems almost obscene – or, in Adorno's terms, 'barbaric' – to talk about lovingly preserving the remains of gas chambers, alongside the memories of the appalling suffering inflicted on helpless people in places whose names are synonymous with brutality: Auschwitz, Majdanek, Dachau. And yet, so argued the opponents of such views, might not the destruction or neglect of what remained of the camps play right into the hands of those who would deny the Holocaust (or, at least, its extent and hence, by inference, its significance)? Might not the obliteration of the physical remains of the past hasten the fading or even the obliteration of memory itself, leading ultimately to the awful fulfilment of Santayana's warning that 'those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it'?

Works of art that try to depict or narrate or somehow engage with the subject-matter of the Holocaust confront us with questions that are just as awkward. It is not simply that we tend to regard the making of art – any art – as a special kind of activity, something to be prized and admired. But also, our very notion of art is often bound up with that of ‘beauty’ and hence with a degree of skill or technical accomplishment. True, some contemporary painters clearly regard a certain crudeness, a lack of skill or refinement as synonymous with a special kind of vitality and directness of expression unfettered by academic conventions, and prize these qualities accordingly. Even so, to say that something is ‘beautifully painted’ is usually taken as a compliment rather than an insult, at least by the majority of artists. But can one ‘beautifully’ paint the Holocaust? Indeed, what kind of art, whether painting or music or poetry, could possibly live up to the task of representing the attempted murder of entire peoples, together with all the horror entailed by that evil ambition?

In fact, art’s relationship to the subject-matter of the Holocaust in general poses even wider and more troubling questions – almost certainly one of the reasons why Adorno cast doubt on the very possibility of ‘art after Auschwitz’. For example, how might the artist, the poet or the musician go about depicting or describing those obvious and fundamental contradictions that lie at the very heart of the Nazis’ genocidal mania? The greatest contradiction of all being, of course, encapsulated in the question: how could it happen that a highly developed and cultured nation should have set about applying all its intelligence, its technical know-how, its ingenuity and formidable logistical skills to the task of inflicting efficient, mechanized death on millions of people whose only crime was that, in the eyes of their tormentors, they were not regarded as ‘people’ at all?

And there are other contradictions, too, which one might have thought it impossible to paint or explain in words or describe in music or drama. Until I saw Robert Priseman’s paintings, I had thought that attempting to depict in any prosaic fashion what remains of the camps and all their paraphernalia of killing would be doomed to failure, if that meant simply creating some kind of visual record of those remains as seen through modern eyes. For the present-day visitor’s experience of visiting these places is, in many respects, an equivocal one. Although the phrase ‘tourist attraction’ sticks in one’s throat, in fact nearly all the sites of former concentration camps have become precisely that, in the literal sense that they now attract many hundreds of thousands of tourists (in the case of Auschwitz, over a million) every year. Moreover, some locations – Hartheim Castle in Austria, for example – are extremely picturesque, as Robert’s coloured drawings reveal. Mauthausen, one of the most feared of all the camps on account of its singular brutality, is spectacularly located on a steep hill-top with views across undulating countryside to the distant, snow-capped Alps. Visiting such sites on a warm summer’s day, surrounded by other well-fed and manifestly healthy visitors clad in brightly coloured holiday attire, can give rise to an almost unbearable feeling of tension between what one is actually seeing and experiencing for oneself and what one knows from

witness accounts and from old black and white photographs – visual documents which, for all their inadequacies, seem to equate in far more vivid and convincing ways to the testimony of those dreadful times, compared with the ‘reality’ of the camps as they exist today.

Only after pondering these dilemmas at some length did it occur to me how important it is to view Robert’s ‘Gas Chambers’ series in its entirety rather than as individual images – not only the paintings but also, of course, the coloured drawings. Only then does one begin to appreciate how skilfully the artist has addressed those same profound contradictions: for example, the tension between beauty of depiction and the horror that resides in the subject-matter, or the jarring disjunction between knowledge and memory on the one hand and, on the other, our own perceptions of the here-and-now. Not only are the coloured drawings ‘beautiful’; they also deliberately recall the kinds of tinted postcards that holiday-makers in the 1930s might well have sent home to family and friends. ‘Having a wonderful time ... wish you were here.’ On first arriving at Hartheim or Mauthausen, were some of the victims still innocently wondering what was in store for them, in contrast to those who already knew? If so, were they struck, if only for a fleeting moment, by the picturesque quality of the setting, the beauty of the landscape, the fairy-tale quaintness of the architecture? Were they taken in (willingly, perhaps, because the truth was too awful to contemplate) by all the cynical, barely plausible lies about ‘re-settlement’ and ‘being allowed to take their possessions with them’ – even mention of ‘a holiday’? And what of us, people who really are on holiday, when we now visit such places in the guise of tourists?

My family and I visited Auschwitz on a beautiful sunny day in July 2006. The weather was perfect, with a gentle breeze wafting through the trees. The landscape through which we drove was idyllic, almost as far as the very doors of the camp at Birkenau – the ‘gateway of death’. ‘Had a nice trip to Auschwitz today ...’ Could one possibly, even in an unguarded moment, have written such a thing – in one’s diary, perhaps, or on a postcard? Part of the magic spell cast by Robert’s postcard-style depictions is that they catch us in just such an unguarded moment – tripping over our own feet, as it were, as we struggle to deal with the welter of contradictory emotions and experiences that form part of the complex amalgam of trying to come to terms with the past.

By contrast, there is nothing beautiful about the oil paintings depicting the gas chambers themselves. Oil is a profoundly intractable medium, even at the best of times. At the worst of times, it can stubbornly confront the painter who would bend it to his will with obstacles no less challenging than the laborious process of carving in wood. The achievement of some of the greatest artists of the part has been to make oil paint appear to be fluid, transparent, flexible, easy to manipulate, which it is not – but that is not Robert’s intention. As we struggle to penetrate the darkness of the canvases depicting Auschwitz and Majdanek (in reality, the pictures are painted on linen), the paint seems to clot before our eyes, its surface bearing the marks of scrapes and scratches that call horrifyingly to mind the last, desperate, scrabbling

gestures of those who clawed the air for help as they succumbed to the poison gas. The gestural quality of the paint in these two pictures is in striking contrast to the smoothness and the icy, seemingly dispassionate quality of the handling of paint in *Bernau* and *Mauthausen*. Here, it is as if the artist is seeking both in the medium itself and in the manner of its manipulation a kind of metaphor for the 'clinical' nature of the purported experiments with euthanasia that are part of the tragic history of 'clinics' such as Sonnenstein, also shown in one of the coloured drawings.

Reflecting further on the things art can do that a simple, artless narrative cannot, one comes to realize that there may, after all, be ways for the poet or painter to confront the challenge of how to 'represent' the Holocaust: strategies that even Adorno might have found acceptable. These strategies have little to do with telling a tale (in words or through images) that comes across as somehow more vivid or 'realistic' than the stories told by Holocaust survivors. That, one must admit, would be almost impossible. It is more a matter of finding ways of manipulating the very medium, the 'stuff' of art itself: melody and harmony, colour and texture, rhyme and metre. Only then can the song, the image or the poem miraculously succeed in slipping past our defences, playing upon our emotions or probing areas of thought and feeling that would be inaccessible by any other means. Yet Adorno, too, himself a talented composer and someone more sensitive to the realities of how art is actually practised than he is often given credit for, was clearly conscious of just such possibilities. In a curious after-word to his original challenge to the possibility of poetry after Auschwitz, he wrote:

I do not want to soften my statement that it is barbaric to continue to write poetry ... But ... suffering ... also demands a continued existence of the very art it forbids; hardly elsewhere does suffering still find its own voice ... The most significant artists of the period have followed this course.ⁱⁱⁱ

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ⁱ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft' [1949], translated into English in *Prisms*, Cambridge, MA (MIT Press) 1983, p. 34.

ⁱⁱ See Yvonne Kyriakides, 'Art after Auschwitz is barbaric', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2005), pp. 441-50.

ⁱⁱⁱ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Engagement oder künstlerische Autonomie' [1962], translated as 'Commitment', in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, New York (Columbia U.P.) 1992, pp. 87-8.