

# Ian Hamilton Finlay, Albert Speer, and the Ideology of the Aesthetic at Little Sparta and Spandau

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**Abstract:** This article assesses the development of Ian Hamilton Finlay's concrete and post-concrete aesthetics from his contact with Brazil's Noigandres poets in 1962 until his late-1970s correspondence with the architect and former Nazi minister Albert Speer. It considers Finlay's work over this period, from early-1960s concrete poems evoking a private realm of formal order to counterfactual renderings of the same works on neoclassical and Third Reich architecture. The second half of the essay offers a reading of *A Walled Garden*, Finlay and Ian Gardner's study of Speer's garden on the grounds of Spandau prison. The article posits a gradual awakening of Finlay's sense of the ideological quality of aesthetic judgement, culminating in works that ask troubling questions about the relationship between the socially unifying work of concretist aesthetics and the social repression and violence of Nazism.

**Keywords:** Concrete poetry, Brazil, architecture, gardens, aesthetics

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At some point in the late 1970s, probably in August 1977, Ian Hamilton Finlay established a correspondence with the architect and former Nazi armaments minister Albert Speer.<sup>1</sup> Finlay had already read *Spandau: The Secret Diaries*,

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Speer's account of his 20-year sentence in Spandau Prison for war crimes and crimes against humanity (published in English in 1976), and over the next two years he seemingly became more and more intrigued by Speer's descriptions—both in his book and in their subsequent correspondence—of the gardening work he had undertaken in the prison grounds.<sup>2</sup> In 1979, a plan emerged for a book project entitled *A Walled Garden*, which would also involve the artist Ian Gardner, with an introduction provided by the poet J.F. Hendry. The idea was inspired by the descriptions of the Spandau gardens provided in Speer's letters, and would consist of a series of watercolor illustrations by Gardner, based on the color photographs of the garden that Speer had also sent to Finlay, with quotes from the letters accompanying several of Gardner's illustrations.<sup>3</sup> The book was never published, perhaps due to what Ross Hair calls “the practicalities and considerable cost of realizing [its] design” (142), but it was completed by the early 1980s, although Speer died in 1981. An uncatalogued folder of materials, including a productional mock-up, Speer's photographs, Gardner's watercolors, and a “parallel mock-up” by Finlay with conceptual notes for his collaborators, is now deposited at New York Public Library.<sup>4</sup>

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late Ian Gardner for allowing reproduction of Gardner's illustrations for *A Walled Garden*; Patrick Eyres and *New Arcadians' Journal* for allowing reproduction of a section of *The Third Reich Revisited* first published in *New Arcadians' Journal* 15 (1984). I also wish to acknowledge the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, for granting me access to correspondence stored with the Ian Hamilton Finlay Papers 1948-1992 (890144) and New York Public Libraries for allowing me to consult the uncatalogued project file for *A Walled Garden* stored with the Print and Spencer Collection. Research towards this project was undertaken during 2015 with invaluable financial support from the British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowships scheme and a Getty Library Research Grant. Sincere thanks to Patrick Eyres, Simon Cutts, Ross Hair, Alistair Peebles, Nancy Perloff, and Pia Simig for assistance with the research towards this article.

<sup>2</sup> Finlay seems to refer to his first letter to Speer in a note to his friend, the poet Thomas A. Clark, on August 24, 1977. The earliest of Speer's letters to Finlay cited in the New York Public Libraries project file for *A Walled Garden* is dated September 27, 1977. Speer's original letters are not stored with the file, only notes of Finlay's quoting from and dating their correspondence, and one complete letter from Finlay to Speer. Writing to his friend the art collector Ronnie Duncan on March 23, 1977, and to Clark on April 4, Finlay recommends Speer's book in enthusiastic terms that suggest he is currently reading or has recently finished reading the diaries, though he seems less engaged at this point by its descriptions of prison gardening than by its evocations of endurance and isolation.

<sup>3</sup> Finlay mentions receiving photographs from Speer in a letter sent to Duncan on September 27, 1979; writing to Ian Gardner some days later, on October 12, he raises the idea of a collaborative project based on Speer's gardens.

<sup>4</sup> On how the file came to be deposited, see Hair (142). I viewed this file during a research trip in 2015, based on information kindly provided by Simon Cutts.

In November 2019, the book finally appeared in print, with a new and detailed commentary provided by the critic Ross Hair. This commentary assumes much the same semi-critical, semi-integrated position in relation to the work as J.F. Hendry's would have in relation to the original, and it is not my aim to match that function. Instead, I want to offer a more distant, contextualized critique of the work, tracing the development of Finlay's concrete and post-concrete poetics from the early 1960s up to the time of his collaboration with Speer.

It was a calculatedly pugnacious gesture for Finlay to undertake a creative project with a former Nazi minister, albeit one who had built up around himself a protective tissue of myth regarding his involvement with Hitler's regime. That is, if such an undertaking seems unacceptable irrespective of its finer details, it is worth noting that it was likely undertaken partly to expose such a reaction. This is to gesture towards an explanation of Finlay's motives that might move beyond both trite accusations of neo-fascism—of the type exemplified at the time by the arts journalist Catherine Millet—and defensive assertions that Finlay's forays into Nazi aesthetics constitute some elaborate, fine-tuned satire.<sup>5</sup> I argue that the Speer project expresses Finlay's new sense, developed by the late 1970s, of the inevitably ideological quality of aesthetic judgement. This supposition led him to explore, in disconcertingly ambivalent terms, the potential complicity of artists and poets with the kind of social repression and violence epitomized by the Nazi regime. I will return to the *Walled Garden* project, but first it is necessary to consider how an aesthetic as troubled by violence as Finlay's could have emerged from the international concrete poetry movement.

### ***Logic and Violence: Concrete Poetry and Information Theory***

Concrete poetry, at least in many of its early Northern-European manifestations during the mid-1950s, represented an attempt to imbue language with a quality of neutrality similar to that which concrete art had brought to visual and

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<sup>5</sup> During a radio discussion on March 25, 1988, Millet noted, with reference to Finlay's work *Ossso*: "I saw a work, I saw Nazi signs carved on it, *basta* [enough]" (qtd in Abrioux 309n19). If such a response is crass in equating any creative usage of Nazi symbols with an endorsement of the attendant political ideology, then a certain type of defensive response to such attacks can seem unconvincing, asserting that Finlay either whitewashes Nazi aesthetics of all socio-political connotations or is simply sending up his audience's tendency to spot Nazi allusions in an overly wide range of cultural forms.

sculptural media.<sup>6</sup> This involved attempting to render a kind of universally intuitable, poetic meta-language, stripped back to a tiny set of lexical and grammatical components arranged in visually arresting shapes, which would mean the same thing to as wide a range of interpreters as possible. Emerging from the historical shadows of World War Two, this was an implicitly, if guardedly, optimistic poetics, staked on the belief that inter-linguistic communication might provide the cognitive infrastructure for international societal reconstruction.<sup>7</sup>

The concrete poets were aided not just by the conceptual schemas of concrete art—and the wider paradigm of mid-century-modernist design and architecture—but also by the insights of information theory, which seemed to provide a way of pre-emptively ensuring the coherence of linguistic messages to a wide audience. The terms of concrete poetry's engagement with information theory, above any other aspect of its underlying poetics, implies a desire to establish communicative bridges between nations, cultures, and languages in the aftermath of global conflict. As such, it provides a particularly striking point of contrast with Finlay's more agonistic sense of concrete poetry's aesthetic and social value—as outlined below—and is worth discussing at slightly greater length.

In the mid-1950s, when concrete poetry emerged as a coherent genre, information theory was a newly emergent science whose applications in aesthetic and communication theory connected it to semiotics. Its influence had quickly spread from the scientific origins of its founders, most significantly the mathematician and electrical engineer Claude Shannon, to the social sciences and humanities.<sup>8</sup> Information theory held that the information content of a message could be measured by calculating the likelihood of its being sent from a particular source rather than any aspect of its semantic or symbolic value: the less predictable a message was, in short, the higher its informational content. This was a revolutionary supposition in fields such as computer science where the

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<sup>6</sup> This approach stands in both contrast and partial overlap with that of the Brazilian Noigandres group. This group's 1950s poetry and poetics were broadly characterized by an interest in linguistic simplification informed by information theory. But they also suggest a clearer sense of language's potential for semantic and contextual slippage, evident in a tendency towards pun, paragram and portmanteau.

<sup>7</sup> See Thomas, chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> See Hayles, chapter 3.

development of efficient systems of information transmission was the aim regardless of the message conveyed.

The legacy of information theory within poetics and aesthetics is rather more vexed. In the case of poetry—and models of linguistic creativity generally—information theory often became a tool for probing the idea that the semantic or symbolic value of a poem or artwork could be relayed without distortion or loss of content from sender to receiver.<sup>9</sup> This transposition of theory could in turn involve an interpretation of information value—unpredictability in Shannon’s sense—as in some sense equivalent to semantic value.<sup>10</sup> In fact, such a postulation both obfuscated semantic value in the very process of defining it—because mathematical probability of usage expresses a fundamentally different aspect of language than symbolic value—and overlooked the fact that, in the case of sign systems such as human languages that are open to subjective interpretation, predictability and unpredictability are themselves mutable, dependent on the cognitive faculties of the individual sender or receiver at a particular point in time and space.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, as the computer artist and critic Florian Cramer notes, concrete poetry, in its “computational understanding of writing and literature,” “found its theoretical underpinning” in information theory: or rather, in information aesthetics, a sub-theory of information theory associated primarily with the philosopher Max Bense, which proposed numerical formulae for defining the aesthetic content of given artworks (67). If we accept this connection—which Cramer attributes mainly to Eugen Gomringer and Northern-European concrete poetry—then the concrete poets’ apparent willingness to overlook the flaws in information theory as a model for linguistic creation suggests the depth of their wish to communicate across national and cultural boundaries in the post-war

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<sup>9</sup> On concrete poets and theorists’ involvement with the application and development of information theory and the related field of “information aesthetics” during the 1950-60s see Thomas, chapter 3.

<sup>10</sup> Although we should avoid reducing concrete poetics to its ambient intellectual contexts, the tendency towards semantic minimalism and methodical permutation of grammatical elements in the concrete poetry produced by Gomringer and the Noigandres poets during the early-to-mid-1950s, for example, might seem tangentially responsive to information value as defined in information theory as the interplay of pattern and randomness.

<sup>11</sup> This critique is closely based on Hayles’s discussion of the interpretation of information theory within the humanities and social sciences, though Hayles does not deal with the specific example of concrete poetry (chapter 3).

decades. It also suggests a desire to rationally and homogeneously define the nature of aesthetic experience through mathematical calculation, which, as the computer artist Frieder Nake notes, was implicit in information aesthetics as a whole; and which, like information aesthetics in Nake's formulation, was rooted in painful memories of the more volatile and insidious uses recently made of artistic spectacle: "[s]uch a radically anti-subjective program for aesthetics must be understood as a reaction against the horrors of Nazi Germany. For many intellectuals, it seemed to be impossible to allow for any irrational or emotional aspect in aesthetics. Too successfully had the Nazi regime used aesthetics (sensual cognition) in their manifestations of supremacy and power" (74). Emerging from the same period of reaction, the concrete poets' appropriation of information theory and aesthetics can be understood in many instances as a comparable attempt not just to define aesthetic experience as a common human capacity but to rationally circumscribe its power.

Aesthetics in its post-Enlightenment German formulation, as Terry Eagleton notes, was already conceived as "a discourse of the body," involving a sensuous encounter with physical reality unfolding beyond the threshold of rational inquiry: "[t]he distinction which the term 'aesthetic' initially enforces [is] between the material and the immaterial: between things and thoughts, sensations and ideas, that which is bound up with our creaturely life as opposed to that which conducts some shadowy existence in the recesses of the mind" (13). In the wake of the Nazi cult of art, aesthetic experience became viewed by many as a tool of political inculcation with the capacity to overpower morality and reason. With this context in mind, Cramer describes the rationalized aesthetics of the concrete, with some accuracy if overly pejorative rhetorical thrust, as "a purist modernism which was ideological just in its ostensible refusal of ideology, and metaphysical in its radical refusal of metaphysics" (68). The concrete poetry of Ian Hamilton Finlay, by contrast, indicates a reaffirmation of metaphysics—or rather the poet's investment in metaphysics—as a necessary substratum to creative expression, while self-consciously playing out the fraught ideological implications of such a position in the ruins of Nazi culture.

*An Order Given: Ian Hamilton Finlay and Concrete Aesthetics*

Finlay was introduced to concrete poetry in May or June of 1962 via the Glaswegian poet Edwin Morgan. That summer he began corresponding with Augusto de Campos, co-founder of the Noigandres concrete poetry group in São Paulo, whose address Morgan had passed on. By the following spring Finlay had published Augusto's work alongside that of two other Brazilian concretists, Pedro Xisto and Marcelo Moura, in the sixth issue of his literary journal, *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse*. These were the first concrete poems published in Britain.<sup>12</sup>

Finlay's first collection of concrete poems, *Rapel: 10 Fauve and Suprematist Poems*, appeared in the early summer of 1963. Although it was influenced by the techniques of phonetic and graphic patterning he had learned from the Noigandres poets, in many ways a better point of comparison is provided by Eugen Gomringer's work from the mid-1950s to early 1960s, which Finlay only became aware of after composing the collection. In the Noigandres group's poetry, from at least the late 1950s onwards, the impression of neutrality outlined above was often a means of disguising authorial polemic, by making politically or ideologically charged statements seem like the neutral by-product of an objective compositional logic. Even before that point, their work expressed a marked tendency towards linguistic play and ambiguity.<sup>13</sup> Gomringer's early 'constellations', by contrast, suggest an earnest attempt to establish linguistic signs that might communicate to any given reader in the same way. This gave his work an illustrative quality of 'purity'—contingent on an object-like presence on the page and a sense of veracity cultivated by linguistic minimalism and repetition—that Finlay admired more than any impression of mathematical objectivity it might have been rendering. It was the same quality that Finlay had brought to many of the poems in *Rapel*.

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<sup>12</sup> See Thomas chapter 3, which includes details of the correspondence between Finlay and the Noigandres poets. These poems were accompanied by a note on "vocabulary," translating key terms from the poems into English, probably based on information provided by Augusto de Campos in his correspondence with Finlay.

<sup>13</sup> Works such as Décio Pignatari's "LIFE" (1958) and Augusto de Campos's "sem um numero" (1957) are in fact encrypted protest poems on subjects such as US cultural imperialism and economic inequality. On comparisons between the Noigandres and Gomringer's work of the kind alluded to here see Perloff.

Finlay's underlying feel for concrete aesthetics had little to do with information theory. In a 1964 letter to the critic Mike Weaver, he posed the rhetorical question "[w]hat reality are the words to stand on?" answering that the concrete poem was:

[Q]uite different from the *social* poem, of the person who has felt (known) nothing of the *sort* of experience one could indicate (the direction of) by talking of Nietzsche or Heidegger—the poem, of an order which is quite different from the sort of order known to those who feel society stretching to the *edge* of the world, as it were—who are safe in that *family*, and who don't know in their *body* that question about *form*, and who therefore feel language as a *home* thing, which I don't, and never have. (But by *form* it is made familiar.) And yet, that there is an order, given, I don't doubt. I mean an order *there*, somewhere, and not an order we can *use* (to save us, as it were) but more, that could use us if we try.  
(iv)

Finlay's poetics at this point is drawing from, amongst other sources, the well of post-Romantic German philosophy—"talking of Nietzsche and Heidegger"—that Eagleton also draws from in his definition of aesthetics as a bodily discourse, and which the Northern European concrete poets were tamping down with the rational weight of information theory. What Finlay proposes is a kind of aesthetic insight rooted in a radical individualism, with isolation from the social mass—and thus perhaps from Nietzsche's herd mentality, or Heidegger's "they-self"—as a prerequisite.<sup>14</sup> This was to involve a pre-rational, bodily engagement with form of some kind—"felt in the body"—but, contra Nietzschean perspectivism, it was to tap into an order originating outside, or at least extending beyond, the

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<sup>14</sup> On Nietzsche's individualism see, for example, *On the Genealogy of Morals*: "it was 'the good' themselves, that is to say, the noble, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded, who felt and established themselves and their actions as good, that is, of the first rank, in contradistinction to all the low, low-minded, common and plebeian. It was out of this pathos of distance that they first seized the right to create values and to coin names for values" (25-26). In Heidegger's *Being and Time* the "they-self" characterizes the inauthentic Dasein that imbibes its values from the social mass rather than from the value system implicit in its own Being (167).

poet's subjective remit: 'there is an order given, somewhere.'<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that Finlay endorses a traditionally religious or metaphysical account of artistic inspiration as conduit of divine truths; here and elsewhere he relays a painful sense of the provisionality of the order established by the poem.<sup>16</sup> What is rather in play is something like a Heideggerian sense of art and poetry as themselves world-creating, establishing the terms of Being within a particular culture without detracting from the metaphysical weight due to ideas of aesthetic value, and of moral and rational truth.<sup>17</sup>

Notwithstanding that position, Finlay's early concrete poems seem more expressive of an aesthetics of isolation than a will to impose any value system on a social mass. The text of his *First Suprematist Standing Poem* (1965) reads as follows:

how blue?      how blue!  
 how sad?      how far!  
 how small?    how sad!  
 how white?    how small!  
 how far?      how white!

The questions and statements relay a moment of spiritual or artistic epiphany contained entirely within the poet's private psychological domain, offering no handle on the world beyond, inexpressible on its terms of reference (though of course rendered at least tangentially communicable to the reader). This is an effect of the deictic ambiguity of the adjectives—*what* is blue? *what* is far?—combined with the emphatic impression of insight or inspiration conveyed by the shift from question to exclamation marks. The work's small-scale sculptural

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<sup>15</sup> On Nietzsche's perspectivism see *On the Genealogy of Morals*: "let us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject'... There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective 'knowing'" (119).

<sup>16</sup> See Finlay's description of the concrete poem as "a model of order, even if set in a space which is full of doubt" ("Letter to Pierre Garnier").

<sup>17</sup> On this concept see Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," discussed below. Writing to Ernst Jandl on July 28, 1965, in the context of a discussion of Heidegger's poetry – which Jandl had derided as hopelessly amateurish – Finlay asked "whether, if some sort of metaphysic must be formulated, the approach of a Heidegger is not indefinitely preferable to the sordid vulgarity of psychoanalysis, which is becoming the metaphysic of man" (Hannessschläger 84). Psychoanalysis, for Finlay, embodied the kind of secular individualism for which perceptions of moral and rational order were mere chimeras of the subjective mind.

presence—the two columns of text were printed on the two inside faces of a small folding card for display on a table or mantelpiece—enhances this contrast between emphatic self-presentation and linguistic enigma: as if formal order has been felt in a way which, literally, cannot be expressed through words, instead finding a form of mute, material expression.<sup>18</sup>

By the 1970s, however, Finlay's work had begun to express a different attitude to the nature and function of aesthetic experience, one rooted in his assertion that 'there is an order given, somewhere.' Finlay increasingly viewed himself as an isolated figure in a contemporary Western culture for which no such objective order existed, concerned simply with subverting and mocking notions of aesthetic value: what Finlay called 'secular' culture, which took all forms of artistic expression as equally valid and thus equally meaningless, equally contingent on individual perspective. This was the culture that he felt had co-opted the concrete poetry movement in Britain and North America, which was satisfied by the late 1960s with simply breaking apart and destroying language, in a spirit of nihilistic abandon he derided as "neo-dada." Increasingly, then, Finlay's work did not simply relay a private aesthetic experience but staged imaginary attempts to impose the order manifested through this experience onto the secular world from which the poet had previously isolated himself. If this sounds like a reactionary gesture, it was undertaken with a keen sense of the ideological problematics of that maneuver itself.

Finlay's work, that is, came both to embody and to express an awareness of what Terry Eagleton would call the ideology of the aesthetic: not only the fact that aesthetic judgement is inherently ideological but that it is therefore potentially dangerous because it can invest principles founded on psychosomatic intuition with the force of divine will:

In ideology and the aesthetic we stay with the thing itself, which is preserved in all of its concrete materiality rather than dissolved to its abstract conditions; yet this very materiality, this uniquely unrepeatable form or body, comes mysteriously to assume all the

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<sup>18</sup> Finlay's brief turn to toymaking during the early 1960s, roughly in-between his phases of linear and concrete poetic practice, seems to express this same intuitive yearning for an order beyond words (Thomas 78). It is worth noting that, depending on how the individual reader chooses to manipulate the poem-object, the phrases might also appear on the front and back covers of the card.

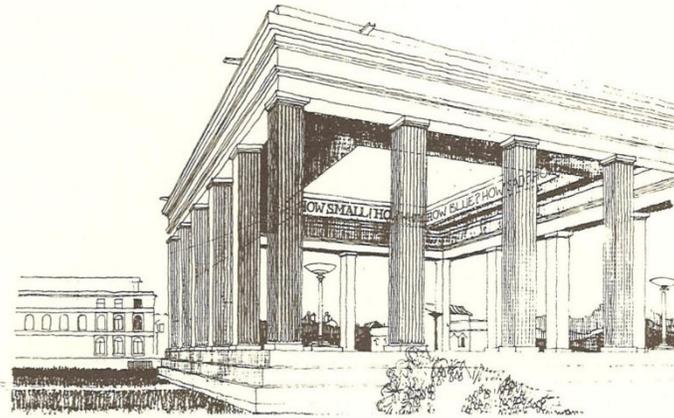
compelling logic of a global decree. The ideologico-aesthetic is that indeterminate region, stranded somewhere between the empirical and the theoretical, in which abstractions seem flushed with irreducible specificity and accidental particulars raised to pseudo-cognitive status. The loose contingencies of subjective experience are imbued with the binding force of law [...] (Eagleton 95)

The implication is not that aesthetic judgements necessarily have political dictates encoded within them—though they sometimes do—but that aesthetic judgements potentially formed in isolation from such positions can nonetheless form the basis of unshakeable worldviews, with political implications “forceful enough to impel the subject to murder or martyrdom” (Eagleton 95). In the right (or wrong) hands, this force can carry a broad social mass along with it.

This is not to say that for Finlay—or Eagleton—the ideologico-aesthetic is necessarily a negative force or that the values it inscribes are always chimerical. Finlay was rather concerned with staging an imposition of his aesthetics onto the secular world as a positive, if pugnacious, gesture without shying away from the ways in which this kind of ideologico-aesthetic force had been turned to destructive ends in recent Western history. With this thought in mind we come to an arresting reworking of the *First Suprematist Standing Poem*.

### ***Little Fields, Zeppelinfelds: Revisiting the Third Reich***

“The Third Reich Revisited” was a collaborative project undertaken with the architect Ian Appleton culminating in an exhibition in 1982 (though a “complete showing” of the series was not offered until 1984-85 [Abrioux 9]). Through a series of sketches and commentaries, Finlay reenvisioned his 1960s concrete poems in a range of quasi-fantastical historical scenarios, including as inscriptions on Nazi monuments or elements of Nazi ceremonies. The core phrase of *Canal Stripe Series 4*, “Little Fields Long [for] Horizons”, thus became a vast slogan spelt out by the ranked masses of the Reich Labor Corps on the Nuremberg Zeppelinfeld. The *First Suprematist Standing Poem*, meanwhile, became an epigraph set along the inner walls of one of Hitler’s Ehrentempel [“Temples of Honor”] in Munich (Figure 1).



### Ehrentempel, Munich

Hitler's first architect, Paul Ludwig Troost, designed the Ehrentempel (twin-Temples of Honour) as a memorial to the martyrs of the NSDAP 1923 *putsch*. Troost's widow wrote, 'No damp vault encloses the coffins of the fallen. Surrounded by pillars they rest under the open sky of the homeland . . . ' In 1947, at the end of the War, the Americans decided to blow up these examples of heroic classicism. But an alternative was proposed: the interior frieze, framing the 'open sky', was used for a deNazifying inscription, (this was the period of the De-Nazification Tribunals). A high-principled but barbaric vandalism was avoided by retaining the *architecture* while altering the *sense*.

The 'Suprematist' inscription acknowledges the sky (The Beyond, The Infinite, The Immeasurable) as the climax of the Ehrentempel. It preserves the transcendental aspect of the original architecture while managing to avoid both the old militarist/heroic and the new democratic/secular. The subject of the inscription is *invoked* rather than *evoked*, and remains enigmatically mid-way between the set of words qualified by questionmarks (minus) and the identical set (in a slightly altered order) with the exclamationmarks (plus). It is not in fact neoclassical like the architecture but neopresocratic.

Figure 1. From *The Third Reich Revisited*

The temples were constructed in 1935 and based on a design by Paul Ludwig Troost, Hitler's court architect until his death in 1934—at which point Speer took over that mantle—as a memorial and outdoor crypt for the Nazi insurgents killed in the Beer Hall Putsch of November 8-9, 1923.

The commentary accompanying the Ehrentempel sketch presents a counterfactual history whereby the poem is inscribed on the monument as a “deNazifying inscription” after the Allied Victory—in reality, the temples were razed to their foundations in 1947 by the U.S. Army. According to the commentary, “[t]he Suprematist inscription acknowledges the sky (The Beyond, The Infinite, The Immeasurable) as the climax of the Ehrentempel. It preserves the transcendental aspect of the original architecture while managing to avoid both the old militaristic/heroic and the new democratic/secular.”

The redeployment of Finlay's poem partly conveys the newly expansive function assigned to aesthetic experience in his work, as well as its neoclassical realignment between 1965 and 1982. The questions and statements no longer evoke a hermetic experience, but one imagined as being impressed upon a collective, namely the visitors passing in reverence through the neoclassical temple. This experience is implied to have some value extending beyond the mere appreciation of formal order, involving a socially unifying sense of “The Beyond, The Infinite, The Immeasurable.” In this sense, Finlay presents a positive image of a rejuvenated spiritual culture, founded on a common ideologico-aesthetic, implicitly offered as a panacea for the malaise of a “democratic/secular” culture incapable of cultivating such unity.

The issue we are expected to take with this, of course, is that this collective experience is not envisioned in some neutral context but one strongly informed by the quasi-spiritual rituals used by the Third Reich as a form of social cohesion: influenced by Wagnerian principles of national mythmaking and architectural principles embodying “the Greek classicism whose sole heir [Hitler] believed the spirit of the German people to be” (Michaud 13).<sup>19</sup> Even if the specific context

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<sup>19</sup> On this Wagnerian influence see Michaud (52-64). As Michaud notes, from 1935 onwards the Ehrentempel and their environs became the site of an annual cultic spectacle. On November 8 the sixteen coffins of the insurgents would be publicly exhibited at the Feldernhalle, site of the coup's final suppression. The following day, Putsch veterans would march to the Feldherrnhalle before a coffin-bearing procession of party members led by Hitler marched from the Feldherrnhalle to the Ehrentempel. “The route was marked by 240 tall pylons draped in red, on which stood urns in which the eternal flame of memory burned” (68).

of a Nazi death cult has been excised, the concrete poem remains the talisman of an aesthetic and attendant social order which, in the real-life situation analogous to the counterfactual one, was imposed through the most brutal means: chiefly the eradication of those deemed (racially or otherwise) unworthy to share in the Nazi vision. As Eric Michaud notes, quoting Hitler's comparison between the forging of state and sculpture, "if the *völkisch* Idea was to appear in all its purity, it was essential that no 'weak and mildewed' part of the people be there to defile the image" (49). Inserting the concrete poem into this situation invites us to consider the complicity between the socially unifying work of the ideologico-aesthetic and the socially divisive work of totalitarian government, to question whether the two are in some sense mutually dependent.

However, Finlay is not simply leading us to speculate on that connection from some position of self-satisfied disapprobation. Instead, more disquietingly, the narrative of denazification compels us to assess in earnest the merits of a culture in which the type of shared aesthetic experience only possible within a non-secular paradigm has been appropriated for the ends of a culture whose empathy for the individual would be erased by the "militaristic/heroic." In so doing, Finlay inevitably *presents*—rather than endorses, given the eschewal of first-person authorial narrative—a limited defense of Nazi aesthetics.

Clearly, we might see this as unacceptable. But that, finally, also seems deliberate. Finlay was by all accounts aware that offering any such qualified defense would meet with pre-emptive hostility amongst a swath of his audience. In inciting that response he was not simply playing the role of justified sinner—though that image certainly captures an aspect of his authorial persona—but compelling his reader-viewers to reflect on the inconsistencies of their own position.<sup>20</sup> If any compromise with Nazi aesthetics as presented in "The Third Reich Revisited" is unacceptable, does any conception of aesthetics extending beyond the monadic worldview of the secular citizen remain possible, given the

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<sup>20</sup> Writing to Ronnie Duncan on April 5, 1980 Finlay asked whether "those who criticise Speer and his sculptor friend [Arno] Breker for associating with Nazi building projects, ever give an instant of reflection to the system they tolerate, a system in which there is an international (not merely national) alliance between the avant-garde and the state, a system in which there is no longer a dialectical Other." The language reflects both his strained awareness of the negative reactions that his Third Reich-themed works would (continue to) receive and the extent to which he had been captured by the myth of Speer as a mere architect, whose collusion consisted in "associating with Nazi building projects."

Gordian knot between aesthetics, ideology, and social cohesion (and ostracization)?

For Finlay, “The Third Reich Revisited” represented “an attempt to raise (in a necessarily round-about way) the questions which our culture does not want to put in idea form” (qtd. in Abrioux 141). It was also, surely, to raise such questions that he would have presented the fruits of his collaboration with Albert Speer.

### ***Walled Gardens: Little Sparta and Spandau***

The ‘Good Nazi’ myth that surrounded Albert Speer at the time of his collaboration with Finlay would endure until at least the early 2000s.<sup>21</sup> It had been engineered primarily by Speer himself, initially in the dock at Nuremberg. He used this platform to acknowledge what a recent biographer calls “an adroitly ill-defined degree of responsibility,” apologizing for his general association with the crimes of the Third Reich while exculpating himself by implication from personal responsibility on various counts (Kitchen 10). This ironically evasive *mea culpa*, together with the fact that “a great deal of highly incriminating evidence was not available to the court,” and Speer’s debonair manner and evident lack of fanaticism—he was rather “one of the new managerial type, untroubled by moral preoccupations”—effectively spared him execution (Kitchen 10, 2).<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless he was found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity for the mass use of forced labor from his appointment as Armaments Minister in 1942 onwards.

Speer used his twenty years’ imprisonment to draft two memoirs that proved hugely successful, *Inside the Third Reich* ([1969] 1970) and *Spandau: The Secret Diaries* ([1975] 1976). Works of some literary merit and historical interest, these were also vehicles for Speer to bolster what the economic historian Adam Tooze calls a “self-evidently absurd” portrayal of himself as “an unpolitical actor,” a mere architect, ignorant of the broader political and military context of his work, even after his promotion to Armaments Minister (553). Speer’s successful

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<sup>21</sup> Kitchen notes that the public narrative around Speer in Germany shifted after the airing of Heinrich Breloer’s three-part TV film, *Speer Und Er* (Speer and him) in 2004 (335).

<sup>22</sup> Speer was “fortunate that the mass murder of European Jews [of which his professed ignorance was dishonest] was not a central issue at Nuremberg,” nor his order for the eviction of Jews from Berlin in 1938 to make way for citizens displaced by his plans for Germania (Kitchen 299, 82-86). Kitchen describes Speer as “handsome, suave, polite, cultured and solidly bourgeois” (311).

projection of himself as the Faust to Hitler's Mephistopheles meant that by the 1970s-80s, as his editor Joachim Fest puts it in a sympathetic biography, he had become "a symbol of exoneration" (1).<sup>23</sup> It also meant that, in collaborating with 'Albert Speer', Finlay was effectively collaborating with a character of popular imagination, albeit one dismantled by academic research long before the public mask started to slip.<sup>24</sup>

Arriving at Spandau in 1947, Speer records that he found "a garden of between five and six thousand square meters in area," "choked with weeds growing waist high" (*Spandau* 68). The prisoners were permitted to work in the garden, which in 1949 was divided up into individual plots (122). In Spring 1951, Speer recalls in a later diary entry, "I dug out the ground [of my plot] to a depth of about half a meter, and created a sunken rock garden; using thousands of bricks, I made a series of retaining walls twenty to forty centimeters in height [...] Now when I lie on the grass in the rock garden, as I did this morning, these brick retaining walls look like a small city. Flowers surround me" (179). Later, during 1957-59, Speer "systematically set about landscaping" the larger Spandau grounds:

I graded uneven ground into interesting terraces, sowed lawns, planted forsythia, lavender, hydrangea bushes, and rose. In addition, I set out twenty-five lilacs of my own raising. Along the paths I have laid out beds of iris two and a half meters wide and fifty meters long. Today [April 14, 1959] seedling pines, birches, and lindens were delivered. With such a wealth of plant materials I can begin to lay out a landscape garden. (335)

In 1961, Speer constructed a second rock garden: "*July 3, 1961* [...] I have dug a pit ten meters long and six meters wide by one and a half meters deep and

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<sup>23</sup> See *Inside the Third Reich*: "[f]or the commission to do a great building, I would have sold my soul like Faust. Now I had found my Mephistopheles. He seemed no less engaging than Goethe's" (31). Kitchen argues that many Germans who had collaborated on a smaller scale were eager to forgive Speer as his public redemption made their own biographies more acceptable: "Speer the good Nazi gave comfort to all the little Nazis" (335).

<sup>24</sup> As Kitchen notes, with reference to two somewhat myopic literary portraits, "[b]y the time that Sereny and Fest had published their biographies of Speer, in 1995 and 1999 respectively, historians had provided ample evidence that Speer had life through his teeth" (361).

brought in humus. I need some two thousand bricks for the terrace” (365). On September 16, 1961 the second garden was finished, “[a] regular, almost symmetrical system of tiers for flowers” (365).

Finlay was probably engaged by various apparent affinities between Speer’s activities and his own since 1966, when he had moved to Stonypath Farmhouse and begun to convert the grounds into the poem-sculpture garden later christened Little Sparta (this was also, coincidentally, the year of Speer’s release). Speer’s arduous physical work in landscaping Spandau would surely have reminded Finlay of his own conversion of a barren patch of the Pentland Hills into a human space suffused with aesthetic value. In a sense, moreover, both Finlay and Speer tended to walled gardens, Finlay having been confined to the Stonypath grounds since the late 1960s by agoraphobia. For Finlay, this was coextensive with a condition of cultural exile from the secular world that was oddly comparable with Speer’s. In his parallel mock-up notes for *A Walled Garden* he remarks: “[t]raditional culture is now a secret garden — soon it will be an illicit activity.”<sup>25</sup> Speer, writing to Finlay on October 24, 1979, remarked: “I very much appreciate your thought that both of us have ‘secret gardens,’ which are in some ways identical.”

Finlay explained the concept for *A Walled Garden* to Speer on January 23, 1980: “eleven sections, with a number of watercolors in each — each section with a title, qualified by a short quotation from what you have written to me about the garden(s). These eleven sections...will be balanced by the Introduction.” According to Finlay’s parallel mock-up: “One could regard ‘A Walled Garden’ as essentially an emblem book, with Ian’s watercolors as the graphic part of the emblem, the section titles and Speer’s quotations [...] as the emblem mottoes, and the Introduction by J. Hendry as the Commentary (or didactic elucidation of what is presented in another mode). This analogy allows one to see that the ‘words’ and ‘pictures’ have a mutually illuminating relationship [...]”

The book is not a work of concrete poetry but stands at the endpoint of a formal reorientation of Finlay’s printed practice, rooted in his encounter with the Noigandres poets, whereby an emphasis on the visual dimensions of language gives way to the combination of language and image in more traditional modes:

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<sup>25</sup> Underlinings in Finlay’s notes and letters are the author’s own.

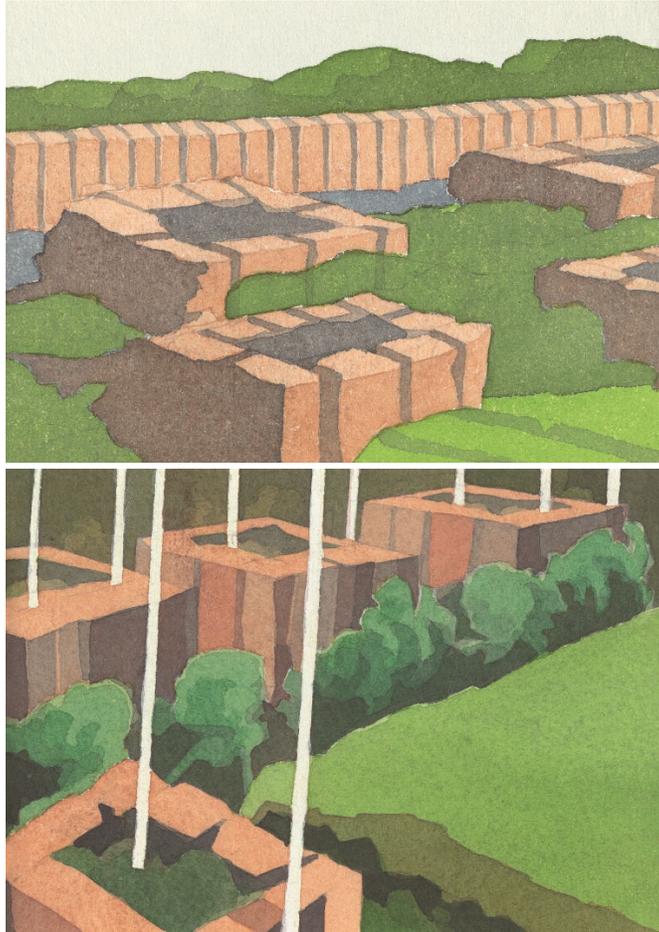
in this case akin to the mutual illumination of image and epithet in Renaissance emblem books. The book's eleven sections are titled as follows:

1. The Walled Garden, Spandau
2. A Bed of Roses, Spandau
3. The Stone Garden, Spandau
4. The Secret Garden, Spandau
5. Arcadian Interludes and Holzwege
6. The Mount, Spandau
7. A Garden of Remembrance, Spandau
8. The Memorial, Spandau
9. The Amphitheatre, Spandau
10. The Cathedral of Light
11. Postscript

Gardner's watercolors mainly depict the Spandau garden as presented in Speer's photographs. But the fourth and eleventh sections return us, metaphorically in the first case and directly in the second, to the Zeppelinfeld at Nuremberg, site of the Nazi Party's annual night-time rallies, whose gigantic central tribune was constructed by Speer in 1934, on a model recalled in *Inside the Third Reich*: "a mighty flight of stairs topped and enclosed by a long colonnade, flanked on both ends by stone abutments. Undoubtedly it was influenced by the Pergamum altar" (55). Speer's visual allusion to the vast altar constructed in the Greek city-state of Pergamon in the second century BC epitomized both "the classical Greek legacy, to which the German-Aryan notion of *Kultur* insistently laid claim" and "the fashion for neoclassicism that swept through the official architecture of the thirties in both Europe and the United States" (Michaud 104, 209).

The principle of the emblem book is such that image and text should ideally replenish each other in a never-ending interplay of related but distinct meanings. This should deter us from unilateral readings of the text's symbolic logic, but one clear visual metaphor does appear to unfold, linking the white poles and trellises supporting Speer's rose bushes to the anti-aircraft light beams used to create his

famous “Cathedral of Light” effect at the 1934 Nuremberg Rally.<sup>26</sup> This analogy is established in section four (Figure 2).



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<sup>26</sup> See *Inside the Third Reich*: “[t]he actual effect far surpassed anything I had imagined. The hundred and thirty sharply defined beams, placed around the field at intervals of forty feet, were visible to a height of twenty to twenty-five thousand feet, after which they merged into a general glow. The feeling was of a vast room [...]” (59).



Figure 2. Gardner's watercolors from section 4, "The Secret Garden"

The climbing poles appear in Gardner's second watercolor. Then, in the third and fourth images, the stone tiers take on the scale and features of the Zeppelintribune, the poles becoming the columns of the light cathedral and the brick terrace transforming into a vast portico. At the same time, the viewer metaphorically assumes the horizontal position from which, Speer suggested, the "stone garden" became a "secret garden" of imaginative reconstruction, its walls taking on the dimensions of a city (or rally ground).

These allusions are borne out in the tenth section, “The Cathedral of Light,” which depicts the Nuremberg rally ground at night and the *son et lumière* effects of the 1934 rally (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The first watercolor from section 10, “The Cathedral of Light”

The resultant association between rose bed and rally ground is consolidated in the “Postscript,” in which the rose trellis from section two reappears as a spectral apparition in the night sky, of the same inky blue as the sky above Nuremberg. Finally, the trellis appears once more as itself (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Gardner's watercolors from section 11, "Postscript."

The two "postscript" images are accompanied by Speer's statement written on the back of a photograph of his rose trellises: "the roses were supposed to climb my construction."

Leaving aside for now that enigmatic pronouncement, Finlay is not attempting here to extricate in any easy way the aesthetics of Speer's Spandau garden from that of his gigantic Nazi-era architectural projects. Indeed, he rather seems concerned with drawing a comparison between the two, albeit one which, as we will see, is nuanced in vital ways. This comparison becomes especially significant when we recall the emphasis Finlay placed during this period on the ideological function of aesthetic experience. He would, moreover, have been aware of the particular emphasis placed on this function under the Third Reich,

wherein art both assumed the primary role in establishing the identity of the German people and became an enabling metaphor for its wider activities, whether social, political, or military: “National Socialism conferred the dignity of the artist upon all the combatants of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, whether they fought on the military front, the labor front, the art front, or the birth front” (Michaud 208-09). This aestheticization of social and political life was never so clearly expressed as at the Nuremberg rallies, as a 1939 description from the National Socialist art historian Hubert Schrade indicates:

All, in the *same* posture, with the *same* costume, lined up toward a *single* goal, must feel that the strict positioning of the columns expresses the order beneath which they have set themselves. Alongside the stone [*am Stein*] they must sense the same will for form that has also seized hold of them, living men. Between themselves and the architecture they sense a total harmony (qtd. in Michaud 210-11).

Dealing with an architectural oeuvre that was seen to inspire Nazi party members to emulate through their political activities the “will for form” of stone columns, it is clearly inadequate to argue that Speer’s self-professed status as ‘just an architect’ means that Finlay’s engagement with the architecture of Nuremberg avoids any allusion to the world in which that architecture took shape.

Finlay, in any case, does not duck such allusions. His parallel mock-up references Heidegger’s *Holzwege* (Woodpaths) as an influence on *A Walled Garden*: the fifth section is even named after the 1950 volume.<sup>27</sup> It is therefore notable that the central essay of Heidegger’s collection, “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935-36), presents art and, especially, poetry as defining the parameters of human consciousness or *Dasein* within a given culture, thereby taking on a quasi-deific or supernatural creative force. Heidegger offers the suggestive example of a Greek temple:

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<sup>27</sup> This also refers to Speer’s use of *Holzwege* “as his pseudonym in his clandestine [prison] correspondence” after reading Heidegger’s book (*Spandau* 447 [translator’s note]).

Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the work draws out of the rock the darkness of its unstructured yet unforced support. Standing there, the building holds its place against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm visible in its violence. The gleam and luster of the stone, though apparently there only by the grace of the sun, in fact first brings forth the light of day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of night. The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of the air. The steadfastness of the work stands out against the surge of the tide and, in its own repose, brings out the raging of the surf.  
(21)

The temple, in essence, is responsible for establishing the parameters of perceptual experience in a particular way to a particular social mass. In so doing, "the temple [...] structures and simultaneously gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire for the human being the shape of its destiny. The all-governing expanse of these open relations is the world of this historical people" (20-21).

In short, "the work opens up a *world*" (22). Not only would the artwork not remain itself shorn away from that world, therefore, but the world would not exist without the work's foundational presence. Given the essay's composition dates, and bearing in mind Schrade's disquieting metaphor, it seems possible that Nazi culture found in Speer's Zeppelintribune such a magical, talismanic force; and given Finlay's engagement with *Holzwege*, the metaphor at the heart of *A Walled Garden* might thus seem to link the work of the Spandau garden, via association with the Zeppelintribune, to the world of the Third Reich, offering some evidence or even provocative celebration of its covert survival in a "secret" space.

To assert this, however, means misinterpreting Finlay's conception of the world opened up by the Spandau garden as identical to that opened up by Speer's earlier works. Glossing a comment from one of Speer's letters—lamenting that his Zeppelinfield stands were blown up, as he "would have preferred a real ruin"

(October 26, 1977)<sup>28</sup>—Finlay comments in his parallel mock-up that “[t]he Zeppelinfeld did, in poetic terms, achieve ‘real ruin’ status, in the form of the Spandau Stone Gardens [...] A romantic fulfilment of the neo-classical.” The world opened up by the gardens is not the world of the Zeppelintribune but another world, which has come into being as a kind of historically determined reaction to or permutation of it. Elsewhere in his parallel mock-up Finlay describes the garden as “the synthesis of the antithesis of the original heroic thesis of the Third Reich itself.” The antithesis, we might surmise—keeping the terms of reference purely artistic for now—comprised the destruction of Speer’s “heroic” classical architecture following the Allied victory.

The notion of the garden as a synthesis of classical and romantic elements, the latter associated with a human (or miniature) scale and with organic rather than architectural forms, is, on closer inspection, central to the *Walled Garden* project. Finlay’s parallel mock-up includes a series of arcane tables distinguishing the various sections of paintings as either “foliar” or “epic” in character and as relating to either “flutes” or “drums.” These word-pairs, indicating the predominance of foliage or brick in a particular set of images, relate to the interplay of pastoral and architectural imagery in the climbing pole-cathedral column metaphor.

Importantly, as Finlay wrote to Speer, the flute-drum and foliar-epic contrasts also establish “the kind of unities of opposites which one finds in Heraclitus, as when he says: ‘God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace [...]’” (January 23, 1980). That is, they indicate a comparable interplay of opposing forces animating the human and natural universe. Elsewhere in his parallel mock-up, Finlay describes Speer’s garden as a “metonym” for the Heraclitean universe. In this sense, the synthesis of classical and romantic elements can be construed in terms of Finlay’s “neopresocratic” phase: his engagement with a Heraclitean, dualistic conception of the universe from the late 1970s onwards, whereby war and peace, for example, were construed as mutually constitutive opposites.

Of course, this shift in focus from artistic epochs to warring cosmic forces indicates that Finlay’s synthesis of classical and romantic elements has clear

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<sup>28</sup> See Speer’s theory of “ruin value,” conceived in 1934, involving the use of certain materials and “principles of statics” to produce structures that after “thousands of years would more or less resemble Roman models” (*Inside the Third Reich* 56).

social and political resonances. More specifically, Finlay may be taking the “romantic” aesthetics of Speer’s garden—like the Ehrentempel sketch—to evoke some counterfactual post-war world which has avoided both the “militaristic/heroic” and “democratic/secular” paradigms. This would be a world that had properly come to terms with its fascist past, a past which, as Finlay states in his parallel mock-up, cannot be “sensibly regarded as an anti-miracle or wholly separate fragment of history.” In this context, the suggestion that Finlay perhaps teases out of Speer’s closing phrase (“the roses were supposed to climb my construction”), bearing in mind the climbing pole metaphor, is of rose vines twining around the light columns at Nuremberg. This would seem to attribute to Speer—in his fictional guise as ‘The Good Nazi’—some desire for a redemptive romantic social paradigm to take hold, overcoming the violence of the neoclassical. The intersecting vertical and horizontal lines in the watercolors included in the postscript, as a visual development on the vertical beams of the previous section, even seem to provide some abstract graphic affirmation of this idea of synthesis.

### ***Conclusion***

To present Speer’s garden as a “romantic fulfilment of the neo-classical” might well seem tasteless given the social and political connotations that Finlay brings to those terms. The image of synthesis, after all, appears to naturalize the violence of Nazism as part of a broader historical continuum whereby periods of war form the necessary precursor to periods of peace. Again, it is necessary to posit Finlay’s authorial strategy of eliciting such viscerally negative reactions in order to tease out a process of inductive self-reflection. Can we envisage, as secular reader-viewers, a future entirely free from political strife and military violence as guarantors of security and individual freedom?

Of course, we might answer in the affirmative. We might also argue that to answer in the negative is hardly to normalize the unspeakably aberrant extremes of Nazi ethnic cleansing and imperial aggression, informed by a unique phase of European political nationalism and set of pseudo-scientific diktats. It is also worth positing the queasy feeling that Finlay’s collaboration with Speer leaves us with following the debunking of the Speer myth. Even at the time, moreover, a reader might have had cause to query the tone of apparently unqualified

deference that characterizes Finlay's letters to Speer. Accepting this point, however, we need to bear in mind Eric Michaud's assertion of the ongoing need "to 'de-Germanize' Nazism" (xi):

[T]here has been a general disinclination to conclude [...] that Nazism reached a blind spot in the cultural and political thought of Europe as a whole. As a result, behind the interest that National Socialism continues to attract, there remains a taboo at the heart of our 'democratic' system that complacently regards Nazism and its leader as the incarnation of an evil now fortunately vanquished.  
(xii)

Without erasing the historical specifics of Nazism, it is hard to argue with Michaud's call to acknowledge "the links that continue to bind us, willy-nilly, to what lay at the heart of the National Socialist myth: namely, the assimilation of work into artistic activity" (Michaud xii). The ideology of the aesthetic, capable of aestheticizing political and social life in the insidious manner that Walter Benjamin outlined—of assimilating work into art—remains a potent force in European culture. Awareness of this fact is encoded in very different ways in early concrete poetics and in *A Walled Garden*, and we ignore it at our peril, as Finlay suggests, if we continue to regard Nazism as "an anti-miracle or wholly separate fragment of history."

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