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In the Neighborhood of Zero

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Frontispiece: Photo taken in the backyard of the Spanos house on Sunapee Street. *From left to right*: Costas (younger brother Charles, age 14); Vaios (father, age 56); me (age 18); Aristides (younger brother Harry, age 16). Courtesy of the author.

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In the Neighborhood of Zero

A World War II Memoir

WILLIAM V. SPANOS

University of Nebraska Press . . Lincoln & London

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Set in Minion by Kim Essman.

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To the memory of those who died in the firebombing
of Dresden, February 13–14, 1945, my neighbors

Hovering over
their microcosmic map,
no periplum,
They,
in shining brass,
push their prosthetic armada
to its destination,
unleash its murderous load, and,
when the unexpecting city below
goes up in turbulent flame,
cry, "good show, old chaps."

Caught in that rain of terror,
we, down here,
under Their abstract gaze,
the living and the dead,
in the midst
of fire and brimstone,
all the boundaries razed,
become
A neighborhood of zero.

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"Did you ever return to Dresden, Professor Spanos?"

"I never left there."

Conversation with a student,
after a lecture on Kurt Vonnegut's
Slaughterhouse-Five

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Preface

In the wake of September 11, 2001, the George W. Bush administration, appealing to the deeply backgrounded American exceptionalist ethos, took advantage of the nationalist fervor precipitated by Al Qaeda's attack on U.S. soil to launch its global "war on terror," the invasion of Afghanistan and then Iraq in the name of (American) civilization. In a ruthless reduction of the cultural and political complexities of the planet, complexities in large part produced by the imperial arrogance and depredations of Western Europe and its contemporary heir, the United States, President Bush declared to the world, "You're with us or against us." Since then, and despite alienating the United States's traditional allies and the vast majority of the people of the so-called Third World in the process of imposing American-style democracies on alien cultures, this president and his neoconservative intellectual deputies systematically exaggerated the threat to "American homeland security" to produce the sense of national emergency—the state of exception that has increasingly enabled the executive branch to ignore civil and human rights—and thus to facilitate the imposition of its paradoxical global agenda: the American Peace.

Although the catastrophic possibilities of this extremist cultural and political strategy are immense, the strategy itself is not new. Indeed, it is one whose origin appears to be simultaneous with the origin of the American national identity itself. I am referring to the "American jeremiad," which, since the New England Puritans, has had as its fundamental purpose the instigation of collective anxiety and an enabling sense of renewal

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by focusing on a frontier beyond which is a wilderness inhabited by an evil enemy who threatens its security, unity, and civilizational energy. This strategy played a decisive role in the formation of the American national identity and its chauvinistic attitude toward "foreigners" ever since the Puritans adopted this appeal to the notion of a national "awakening"—reminding "backsliders" of their "chosen calling"—as a means of securing and renewing its disintegrating collective consensus, the "Covenant." In a highly orchestrated speech to the American people on September 11, 2006, President Bush, commemorating the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, appealed to this Puritan/American tradition in the face of growing skepticism about the war in Iraq. It is not accidental that he concluded his speech by asserting that the "American calling" in the wake of the attacks on the American homeland was to win the global war on terror and, echoing the Jeremiahs of the American past, from Jonathan Edwards through Daniel Webster to Samuel P. Huntington, called for "a third Great Awakening."

The following memoir about my experience in World War II, written a long half-century later, particularly the "legendary" Battle of the Bulge in December 1944 and the nearly forgotten firebombing of Dresden, is not, therefore, intended to be "objective," simply another of the numerous narratives of that "good war" written by the official custodians of the American national memory or by ventriloquized American veterans who have contributed to the longevity of the exceptionalist mythology of the American national identity. I mean the mythology that "America," different and superior to the decadent "Old World," had been "elected" by God or History to fulfill His or Its benign purpose in the world's wilderness. On the contrary, my memoir is frankly intended as a counter-memoir, a dissident remembrance of, a witness to, this "just war," whose cumulative glorification has been recently reiterated in *The Greatest Generation* (1998), the encomium to the America of World War II and the American soldiers who fought it written by the popular former anchorman of NBC Tom Brokaw, and in *The War* (2007) produced by the prestigious documentary filmmaker Ken Burns.

In thus offering this counter-memory, my purpose is not by any means

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to disparage the multitude of young men who fought, were wounded and maimed, taken prisoner, or died violent deaths during that terrible global war. It is, rather, to *remember* the singularity of the war and to call into question the insidious ideological uses to which the dominant culture in the United States has insistently put its "sacrificial" victory over the barbarian enemies in its aftermath: during the Cold War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and, not least, in the wake of Al Qaeda's attacks on the American homeland, when the Bush administration, aided and abetted by the culture industry, even more than the preceding ones, systematically invoked the memory of America's call to its young men in the 1940s in behalf of its historically ordained global mission. I mean its exceptionalist war on terror and the imposition of American-style—that is, capitalist—democracies on alien (barbaric) cultures to make the world "safe for" civilization. Against a cultural memory that has attributed sophisticated consciousness to them, it should be remembered that these American young men, like me, were mostly uneducated and inexperienced boys. The vast majority had only a minimal sense of the history that precipitated the war. And once we were plunged into the waking nightmare of combat, it was not grand narratives of our nation's eventual victory that motivated us; it was primarily *survival* in a larger totality that was beyond our experience to think. However we recounted our experiences after the war or however it was recounted for us by historians and the media, it was, as the telling margins of their stories invariably suggest, not so much our will to contribute to a clear-cut higher cause—freedom, democracy, civilization, America—that was our primary motive in combat as it was this sheer will to survive a global momentum of violence beyond our ken.

In keeping with this haunting and dislocating reality about the American soldier in World War II, I want to say at the outset that the young boy I write about in the following pages now, fifty years after the event, is in some fundamental way foreign to me. This is not only because the minute particulars of his thoughts, feelings, and actions in the seemingly unending midst of that infernal moment has been obscured by the great lapse of time. It is also and primarily because the interim between that

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time and this, not least the long and arduous process of "education" out of the darkness of ignorance—which is to say, the illusions of "disinterested" truth—has rendered my identity radically different from his. In the painful process of writing about him, I was often taken aback by a sense of alienation not only from his physical appearance but from his mind and soul. What, I thought, had that young bewildered boy, who, as the saying goes, "didn't know his ass from his elbow," and the turbulent history into which he was flung to do with me? What right do I have to speak for him, to narrate his story? Am I imposing my late, postmodern identity and sense of the world under the aegis of America on the singularity of his experience? Am I mimicking in reverse the prevailing, triumphalist, story about the young men who fought World War II?

And yet I do somehow recognize this boy, especially certain apparently isolated particular gestures of body and soul that keep leaping out at me, as if to assure me that he is my kin, as I strain, often with shameful tears in my eyes, to remember him and what he went through. And these intimations have to do with precisely his vague but insistent intuitions, precipitated by the circumstances of his captivity and, above all, the horrific firebombing of Dresden to which he bore witness—his experience in an infernal zero zone, as it were—into the unbridgeable disparity between the way his youth was represented for him by the American "world" after his return and the acutely existential way he was himself experiencing it. To put these intuitions another way, they have to do with his sense of being a minute and expendable, but necessary, pawn in a larger scheme that was way beyond the range of his comprehension.

In a way I began writing this book about my experience as a prisoner of war in Dresden, Germany, on August 16, 1945, the day the government of the United States announced the end of World War II—immediately after it had dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. I knew then that, despite my will to forget what I had undergone in that brief, traumatic five-month period of my life, I had to write the book. I also knew what I wanted it to say. And that was because I felt I had borne witness to a massive crime against humanity that no appeal to reason, not

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even to the saving of countless other lives, could justify. But that knowledge was essentially visceral. I had neither the worldly experience nor, therefore, the breadth and depth of mind and, above all, the language that would make the haunting sense of it that was buried in my being, right down to my capillaries, overt and intelligible to the others to whom I felt responsible. It has taken me a lifetime to achieve that breadth and depth of mind and that language. Only now, in the twilight of my life, after many years of obsessively teaching and writing around this singular and unspeakable event—I am convinced that it has all been preparatory—have I been able to do away with the scaffolding that has cluttered everything I have written. To put this divestment as William Butler Yeats does in one of his greatest but still to be understood poems, I have been able to come down "to where the ladders start / In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart."

For this liberation from the prison house of abstraction, I am paradoxically grateful to all those materialist intellectuals and scholars—the existentialists, the phenomenologists, the feminists, the neo-Marxists, the poststructuralists, the postcolonialists—whose works I read voraciously after the war. Reading modern Western civilization itself against the grain, they refused, in one way or another, the victors' interpretation—an interpretation from above—of the richly various complex world, the shattered world below.

On another, more personal, register I want to express my deep-felt gratitude to all those who accidentally crossed my path during the infernal journey I was bound upon—Doris, Tom Yukie, Bob Wagner, Jerry, Claire, my unknown fellow soldiers in the garbage pit, the British soldier in Stalag IV-B, the unnamed foreman in the factory at Rabenau, Brigitte and Frieda, even Persephone, and not least Aris. These nobodies in the world below, as I reiterate in a woefully inadequate language of mourning, "came and went." Nevertheless, in reminding me, each in his or her or its own way, that there was care in the abysmal world into which we had been thrown, they left their indelible mark on the sensitive skin of my being, an inventory to be read and deciphered—and brought back to life—at a later time.

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More immediately, I wish to thanks my former student and beloved friend Assimina Karavanta. For a very long time after my return to the world, I, like many others who had suffered the lunatic violence of the war, found it virtually impossible to speak directly of my traumatic experience to my family, my friends, my colleagues. When I was asked about it, I responded, of course, but invariably in a way that suggested that what had happened to me was no more important than all the other war stories they had heard. My silence was the consequence not simply of the unspeakable horror of what I had experienced but also, as I have said, of my feeling that I was not in command of a language commensurate to the task of adequately representing the meaning it had for me. Over the years I was often goaded by my memory of that dreadful time into beginning the process of writing, but the spark it ignited always died out in the face of the enormity of the project. This was especially the case during the benighted years of the Vietnam War, when, adopting the strategy of "attrition" against an invisible enemy, the United States was destroying Vietnam "in order the save it for the free world." It was, in fact, not until the spring of 1999 that, thanks to Mina, I made the decision to begin writing the book.

We were sitting one evening on the front porch of my house in Castle Creek, New York, drinking wine and talking about the role that the myth of American exceptionalism had played in the first Gulf War. Somewhere along the way, the subject of the massive B-52 bombings of North Vietnam came up. And to underscore the undiscriminating brutality of America's conduct of that war—its indifference to the distinction between combatants and civilians—I mentioned that I had been in Dresden during the Allied firebombing that reduced that venerable German city to rubble and killed an untold number of people, possibly over a hundred thousand, in one night and day air raid. This parenthetical personal reference to an epochal event that the official histories of the war—the legacy of the complicity between the state and the culture industry—has more or less erased from history had a powerful impact on my European interlocutor, and it shifted the focus of our conversation. She asked me to tell her what happened, and during the next hour or so, loosened by the wine and her intense interest, I did. Deeply disturbed by my personal "story"—

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and its unexpected implications about the United States—she wondered why I had not written about it, especially, she reminded me, given that I was always telling my students that the responsibility of the intellectual is, above all, to bear witness. In response, I told her that the singularity of my experience demanded a kind of writing of which I, steeped in the academic jargon of literary criticism and theory, was incapable. "But, Bill," she replied, "you've just done what you're saying you can't do. Please believe me." This combination of Mina's ironic reference to *la trahison des clercs* and the enthusiasm with which she received my story instigated my decision to begin writing after many years of procrastination.

Since then, roughly ten years ago, when I began tentatively to translate that buried time in my life into writing, my book has benefited greatly and in multiple ways by the care and generosity of several academic and personal friends: my *boundary 2* colleagues, who have encouraged my intellectual heresies through the many years of our association—Paul Bové, Dan O'Hara, Don Pease, Michael Hayes, Jonathan Arac, Cornel West, R. Radhakrishnan, Ronald Judy, Lindsay Waters, Kathryn Lindburg, and Jim Merod; the memory of my parents, Vaios and Marigoula, whose abiding love enabled me to survive the horror; my sister, Olga, whose beautiful face was a talisman in that time; my brothers Stephanos, Aristides, and especially Costas (Charlie) and his grace-filled wife, Joy, whose care has encouraged me to resist the ravages of time; my beautiful niece, Theo Spanos Dunfey, who became my unofficial agent after reading the manuscript in one sitting; my sons, Aristides and Adam, and my daughters, Maria and Stephania, who have let me be, even at this late date. Last but not least, I thank from the bottom of my heart my former wife and dear friend, Susan Strehle, Adam's mother, who has listened to me read as I have written—and has been moved to tears more than once by what she has heard.

Finally, I want once again to single out and express my gratitude to my friend and *boundary 2* colleague Donald Pease. At a *boundary 2* conference on the "Future of Literary Studies in the Academy" at Pittsburgh University in October 2007, I read a brief section of the chapter from my memoir on the firebombing of Dresden, which I had introduced by say-

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ing that, though what I was about to offer had nothing to do with literary studies, it might suggest, to those who knew something about the early years of the journal and/or had followed my errant scholarship over the years, "where I had come from." Because I had to catch a flight back to Binghamton an hour or so later, I wasn't able to stay to hear how my reading was received. Two days later, however, I had an e-mail note from Don, who was now in Berlin, telling me how much he was moved by "my passing on what was beyond the telling." Responding to my repeated use of the phrase *zero zone* to characterize the "place" that was Dresden after the apocalyptic firebombing, he went on to say that, as he heard it, that zero zone, which was the unspeakable consequence of the firebombing, was also, and because of that, a zone in which the social bond as I had been taught to feel it by "America," had been broken. It was this "revelation," he suggested, that enabled me to respond the way I did to the dead of Dresden, the "figures in the rubble who had been reduced to nonexistence," and turned that burned-out nonplace into "the neighborhood of zero."

I cannot, of course, be certain that the story that follows will be received by my readers as the testimony to the horror of the Allies' firebombing of Dresden I intend it to be, not to say to the redemptive "neighborhood of zero" it revealed like an epiphany. Indeed, I am profoundly aware of the abyssal gap remaining between my feeble words and the unspeakable singular event itself. But I am satisfied at least that what I have written about this event has retrieved something of that boy's life—some semblance of his awakened being—from the oblivion to which he and so many millions like him have, for all the encomiums to the "sacrifices of our greatest generation," been relegated by the banalizing Word of the custodians of the American cultural memory.

It is with great pleasure that I express my gratitude to Heather Lundine, editor-in-chief of the University of Nebraska Press, for her warm response to and generous support of this work, and to the staff of the press, who guided it through publication, particularly Elizabeth Gratch, whose copyediting was full of care.

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