



Auden's O: The Loss of One's Sovereignty in the Making of Nothing

Andrew W. Hass

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Explores the rise of the idea of nothing in Western modernity and how its figuration is transforming and offering new possibilities.

In this groundbreaking, interdisciplinary history of ideas, Andrew W. Hass explores the ascendancy of the concept of nothing into late modernity. He argues that the rise of the reality of nothing in religion, philosophy, and literature has taken place only against the decline of the concept of One: a shift from a sovereign understanding of the One (unity, universality) toward the “figure of the O”—a cipher figure that, as nonentity, is nevertheless determinant of other realities. The figuring of this O culminates in a proliferation of literary expressions of nothingness, void, and absence from 1940 to 1960, but by century’s end, this movement has shifted from linear progression to mutation, whereby religion, theology, philosophy, literature, and other critical modes of thought, such as feminism, merge into a shared, circular activity. The writer W. H. Auden lends his name to this O, his long poetic work *The Sea and the Mirror* an exemplary manifestation of its implications. Hass examines this work, along with that of a host of writers, philosophers, and theologians, to trace the revolutionary hermeneutics and creative space of the O, and to provide the reasoning of why nothing is now such a powerful force in the imagination of the twenty-first century, and of how it might move us through and beyond our turbulent times.

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