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# The perils of mythmaking: Harry Mulisch's *Siegfried* (2001)

*I How do you write about Hitler?*

In 1985, in his book *Imagining Hitler*, Alvin Rosenfeld wrote: "Forty years after Hitler's death, what is it that accounts for the continuing Nazi hold on the imagination, a hold that seems to be not just lingering but in some ways increasing in intensity? Why does Hitler preoccupy us so, and in shapes that are overwhelmingly fictive or fantastical and not predominantly historical?" And again: "Far from fading with the passing of the decades since his defeat and death, he has moved ever closer to the center of consciousness and is today a figure of inescapable presence."[1] Today, another twenty years later, fascination with Hitler has not decreased; it is at an all-time high, with new biographies by Ian Kershaw,[2] a brand-new movie *The Downfall,* and in the context of the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II, documentaries and yet more books.

Harry Mulisch's version of what Ian Kershaw has called "The Hitler Myth,"[3] *Siegfried*,[4] was published in 2001 and received with – at least so the *flaptekst* (the cover blurb) suggests - fanfare and enthusiasm. It is, predictably in the case of Mulisch, intriguing, annoying, and – at least in my opinion – full of holes.

Let me summarize the novel's story briefly.

The famous Dutch author Rudolf Herter, accompanied by his *vriendin* Maria,[5] is visiting Vienna to give a series of interviews and a lecture at the National Library. He is obviously one of the prominent cultural representatives from Holland for whom the guest country pulls out all the stops. During an interview with a certain Sabine, Herter divulges that he is working on a novel about Hitler, but he is having difficulty finding an angle. In the course of the interview and thereafter, Herter ponders the various aesthetic and ethical problems associated with his project. At the end of his lecture in the *Prunksaal* of the National Library, an old couple, Walter and Julia Falck, introduce themselves and suggest that they can help Herter in his quest to write a book about Hitler. In a subsequent encounter in their old folks' home, the Falcks tell their story, which contains two bombshells. Upon his return to the hotel, and left alone by Maria, Herter begins to speculate about the true nature of Hitler. As the associations come ever more quickly and abundantly, he has a heart attack and dies, holding in his hand an object given to him by the Falcks: a lead figurine made by Hitler. The Dictaphone, left running, suggests that a terrible encounter has taken place.

Stated in simple terms, *Siegfried* presents yet another attempt to capture Hitler in fictional form, and thus Mulisch joins the ranks of such authors as Ernst Weiss, Beryl Bainbridge, George Steiner, Eric Emmanuel Schmidt, and many others.[6]

The novel is not one of Mulisch's best. Readers' reactions to it both in The Netherlands and in North America have oscillated between admiration for and irritation with the kind of "cleverness"

and arrogance we recognize also in *De ontdekking van de hemel* and, much earlier, in *Het stenen bruidsbed* – although it is not always clear whether Mulisch is serious or having fun with his readers: critics in The Netherlands were divided about this, as about a number of other things. My own main difficulty is with the genre itself, fiction which which alters historical fact to create an alternative world ("virtual history" or *uchronie*)[7] and the way Mulisch handles it. Following Mulisch's own suggestions in the book, I therefore propose to examine *Siegfried* not only from the point of view of what it suggests about Hitler (which, it has to be admitted, is of considerable interest), but also from the point of view of how the novel is written, and what it says about the possibilities and limitations of this genre in general. In a sense, I am trying to treat this novel within the context of a discussion generated by Alvin H. Rosenfeld in *Imagining Hitler* (1985), with side-glances at Ron Rosenbaum's *Explaining Hitler* (1996) and Daniel R. Schwarz's book *Imagining the Holocaust* (1999).[8]

Let me begin by saying a word about the construction of the novel. We are, as my summary suggested, dealing with a kind of "frame novel" (a *Rahmenerzählung*), in which the first third is taken up by a double *mise-en-scène* of the author Herter and his perceived topic (the yet to be written story about Hitler). A Hitler story (but not the one planned by Herter) then takes up the second part, and a "theorizing" section about Hitler occupies the third (return to the frame); this is followed by an interposed section composed of invented letters by Eva Braun concerning the last days of Hitler; and the novel concludes with an "epilogue"- Maria's discovery that Herter has died.

This scheme suggests three topics:
1. What is the importance of the rather elaborate *mise-en-scène* of the fictive author Herter?
2. What is original and what is valid about Mulisch's interpretation of Hitler? This question, as we shall see, must be divided into two parts: a) What does the Hitler story as told by the Falcks contribute to our understanding of Hitler, and what does it contribute to the genre of "virtual history" that is original? b) What is the "truth- value" of the speculations by Herter himself about Hitler?
3. Finally, what is the relationship of *Siegfried* to the "Hitler Myth"?

Since Mulisch makes considerable efforts to set up his protagonist, the writer Rudolf Herter whose project is the true subject of the novel, it seems appropriate to look at the first section of the novel a little more closely.

Herter's arrival in Vienna – where he is well known – begins a kind of mythmaking about this author that seems to serve, in an oblique but also slightly ironic way, to mythicize the author Mulisch himself. In a general way, the visit to Vienna echoes the setting of *Het stenen bruidsbed*, which involves a return by an American soldier to Dresden after the Second World War. There are also oblique references to Mulisch's earlier works, here called *De vogelverschrikker* ( = *Archibald Strohalm*) and *De Uitvinding van de Liefde* ( = *De Ontdekking van de Hemel*). Interviews, a reception at the Dutch Embassy at which a number of other prominent artists spout their ideas about culture, a keynote address – these are elements associated with an author who travels the circuit and for whom it is normal to have "vliegtuigen, limousines

en vijfsterrenhotels" (73) put at his disposal; there is even a reference to the State Prize for Literature. Such indications suggest that there is a fair amount of autobiography involved.[9] And the mythmaking does not stop at the personal level, since Herter is held up as an example for younger writers, and given a function as "role model" in his national culture.

If all this is a not-so-subtle form of self-aggrandizement on the part of Mulisch himself, it is at the same time counterbalanced by the author's insistence on Herter/Mulisch's rather humble background, and a kind of boyish astonishment at his achievements and merits (17). After all, his particular talent just happens to be telling stories – "je moest het eenvoudig doen."[10] In short, this section is a play with mirrors, perhaps showing an attitude not altogether appropriate for the subject at hand. To this I will return later.[11]

Such then is Herter's standing, and such are his qualifications when he comes to the project of writing about Hitler: "als iemand op aarde er voor gekwalificeerd was, dan was hij het" - in fact, "Misschien ben ik daarom wel op de wereld" (31).[12]

Herter's project involves two crucial questions: First, the subject matter, the "what," i. e. which Hitler to present out of an endless assortment of Hitlers that exist not only in people's memories, but also in the biographies and histories with which Herter and his potential readers are familiar. To use Herter's irreverent formulation, how is he to achieve the "Endlösung der Hitlerfrage"?[13] Herter reaches a tentative conclusion about Hitler in the statement, "De dood was de grondtoon van zijn wezen." For his own approach, he seems to have settled on the question, "Hoe kon hij onderzoeken of er mischien toch nog een laatste greintje levensliefde school in die sterveling?" (54).

Herter's second problem involves the question of the "how," i. e. in what *manner* to present Hitler. In confronting this question there are some interesting suggestions about Herter's working method and aesthetics which, one is tempted to say, might equally well apply to Mulisch himself. Herter, it is stated, lives in two worlds: "de wereld van zijn individuele ervaringen en de wereld van de mythische verhalen; die moesten op een organische manier zoiets als een chemische reactie met elkaar aangaan en een nieuwe verbinding vormen"(60). Herter's claim that the "manner" is of greater importance than the subject, "dat het in de kunst altijd ging om het hoe, nooit om het wat" is crucial not only for questions of aesthetics, however: it might also answer possible objections on moral grounds against Mulisch's own choice of topic and way of treating it. To this sticky point, too, I will return later.

A further passage focuses on the criterion of "fantasie" or "verbeeldingskracht" (20). Here the most important point made is that "kunstzinnige fantasie ... niet zo zeer iets [is]... dat begrepen moet worden, maar eerder iets *waarmee* je begrijpt"(21). For Herter (and for Mulisch?), fantasy, or simply an invented story, is a tool for understanding something: it is a "cognitive instrument" rather than an object for the imagination to contemplate. This point is elaborated during Herter's interview with the journalist Sabine, a crucial passage, because here the formulation, the actual way in which Herter

is going to approach his project, reaches a critical point. The idea of "grasping" Hitler by using "fantasie" or "verbeeldingskracht", and the attempt to understand such a person "door [hem] in een totaal gefingeerde, extreme situatie te plaatsen en te zien hoe [hij] zich vervolgens gedraagt" is first clearly outlined here. Herter calls it a "gedachten-experiment, of nee: fantasieën-experiment ... Misschien is fictie het net waarin hij gevangen kan worden" (22-3). And so he decides: "Ik wil vanuit een of ander verzonnen, hoogstonwaarschijnlijk, hoogfantastisch maar niet onmogelijk feit uit de mentale werkelijkheid naar de sociale werkelijkheid." Ignoring Maria's question, "hoe kun je een extremere situatie verzinnen dan die hij zelf heeft verzonnen en verwerkelijkt"? – a question which is indeed a real dilemma for any treatment of Hitler – Herter considers a variety of situations which are "hoogfantastisch, maar niet onmogelijk."[14] The trick is to find an event or episode that is in line with what we know about him, of course, but also something that is not in contradiction with his nature – whatever that might be. It is at this point in the narrative that the Falcks come to the rescue and the slide into the inner story, the "invented" but not impossible Hitler story, takes place.

*II The Falcks and Eva Braun*

I would now like to turn to the two parts that specifically deal with the image and interpretation of Hitler – first, the story the Falcks tell Herter, and then Herter's own speculations about Hitler. Taken together, we could call these Mulisch's Spin on Hitler.

In the Falck story Mulisch pulls out all the narrative stops, in contrast with the next portions of the text, where the "theorizing" and speculations completely halt the narrative flow and he indulges in essayistic and at times fairly tedious writing rather than narrative. In the Falck story Mulisch uses his narrative devices with considerable skill. He distributes his information over two characters, Walter and Julia, who in addition are partly in disagreement - about details, but also about how to interpret what happened; he uses hints and suggestions (for example the photo of the boy on the dresser), anticipation, retardation, a certain degree of mystification. Twice the Falck story is interrupted, once by a bearded man (103)and once by the director of the home (117); these are blind motifs, but they heighten the tension. And of course there are the reactions and asides throughout the Falck narrative – a kind of chorus – by Herter.

This is what the Falcks tell Herter:

Walter Falck has worked in a café in Munich where Nazi radicals used to meet. When Hitler settles in the Berghof in Berchtesgaden, he persuades Falck and his wife Julia to come and work as servants – they are happy to accept so that they can leave Austria after having participated in the coup against Dollfuss. They have to swear an oath of secrecy to Hitler – and at this point they in turn demand of Herter that he swear not to reveal what he is about to hear until he receives news that they have both died. Herter accepts readily (119). There follow descriptions of some of the gatherings at the Berghof, some of the important and well known people around Hitler, and also of course Eva Braun. All of this is more or less historically

documented material. Mention is made of Eva Braun's several attempts to commit suicide and of Hitler's reaction: to have her live closer to him. At this point Herter, thinking about his own earlier question, "of er misschien toch nog een laatste greintje levensliefde school in die sterveling?" (54) concludes: "Hij was dus in staat tot liefde"(88). But the Falcks don't believe so, even though Eva Braun was truly in love with Hitler.

The narrative by Falck up to this point yields two contradictory images of Hitler.

There is the image that is the result of his own propaganda, that is to say, by and large the "myth" of the public figure as we see it described in Ian Kershaw's *The Hitler Myth*. This myth surfaces in the description even of people who are close to Hitler, and who have little reason to admire him. What they admire is above all the "act" Hitler puts on. In the words of Walter Falck, "Elke beweging was van een volmaakte beheersing en precisie, als bij een acrobaat, een trapezewerker ... heel beangstigend." (91)

There is on the other hand an opposite tendency to tear the mask off this "act" and to expose it for what it is, namely a "performance." This role of debunking and mocking Hitler is primarily given to Julia Falck: "Allemaal theater," she comments. Unlike Walter, Julia is not taken in by the efforts of Hitler and his entourage. She knows, for example, that Eva Braun, when meeting the Fuehrer, has padded her bra. In a similar vein, she comments on Hitler's salute with his right hand that it looks "alsof daar een dienblad op moest" (99) Yet despite glimpses of a Hitler as a rather mediocre character, the "private" Hitler of slippers and reading glasses, there still is a certain style that inspires awe, and especially one feature, what Thomas Mann – Herter remembers – has called his "basiliskenblik" (96). Especially Walter Falck contributes to the continuation of the Hitler myth, and he is frequently supported in this by Herter's comments, which reflect much of the characterizations of Hitler by historians and biographers.[15]

The story comes to a first climax with the announcement of Eva Braun's pregnancy – a fact stranger than fiction – more, Herter feels, than he could have invented himself.[16] Because Hitler "belongs to all German women," he has remained celibate, and a child would be an embarrassment. The Falcks must act as if it is their child. This stratagem justifies the presence of a gynecologist in the Berghof, and many other incongruous events. Mulisch's fantasy indulges in a series of semi-comical episodes of disguises and subterfuges to make Julia Falck appear to be the pregnant woman. At the end of her pregnancy, Eva Braun disappears from the Berghof, only to return when her child is born.

The child is a son, predictably called Siegfried – his photo is still on the dresser in the Falck apartment. His date of birth suggests a number of coincidences that continue the Hitler Myth in Herter's mind[17] – which is not hard to do, since it is a pure invention and Mulisch can do what he wants with this material. At the same time, however, Mulisch can't resist undercutting his mystifying and mythicizing attitude towards Hitler and his destiny by conjuring up yet another pair of contrasting images: While for Hitler the birth of a son is a "holy moment"– "Ein Kind ward hier geboren" he says, quoting from a Wagner opera

– Julia claims that Bormann looked at the baby "alsof hij het liefst om zijn Ausweis zou vragen" – an instance of Mulisch's odd humour.

After the birth of Siegfried, life at the Berghof more or less continues as before, with Hitler showing little interest in his child. Towards the end of the war, however, Hitler needs to move to Berlin. He orders Eva Braun to accompany him, on 22 September 1944, leaving instructions for Falck to kill Siegfried and make it look like an accident.

Quite correctly, the question of the *reason* for the order is raised at this point. Perhaps Hitler found out he was not the father, it is suggested (although he married Eva Braun later), but Julia ponders, "Er is geen touw aan vast te knopen ... Kennelijk is er nog iets heel anders gebeurd" (139). Of course this might simply be another example of the way Mulisch likes to obscure his story; but in the larger context of the novel, it could also be the first suggestion that Herter's attempt to "understand" or "explain" Hitler's behaviour, in this episode also, makes his whole project futile and doomed to failure. The "solution" for this mystery is only given in the letters written by Eva Braun in the bunker (see below); and this information is not available to the Falcks nor, more importantly, to Herter. Walter Falck, in any case, in the full knowledge that if the order is not obeyed both he and Julia will be killed, and intent on protecting Julia, carries out the order. Siggi is killed "by accident" on the shooting range and buried in the cemetery of Berchtesgaden – as Falck's son.

Two ironies conclude this part of Mulisch's novel: Herter comments that Falck's story makes everything more incomprehensible, but because of that very fact it is also so obviously "true" (149) – we as readers know of course that it is not; and the Falcks thank Herter because if he had not listened, it would have been as if Siggi had never existed – which, as we know, he did not.

Let us now turn to the rest of the book, which consists of Herter's speculations about Hitler, a selection of letters supposedly written by Eva Braun, and an epilogue.

Despite the ambiguous aspects of Hitler's personality as it results from Falck's story, and despite the obvious embarrassment caused by Hitler's unexplained motivations for killing Siegfried, Herter remains undeterred; his arrogance prevents him from doubting the wisdom of his enterprise, and his belief that there can be an explanation of the Hitler phenomenon in general continues undisturbed. In fact, after his return to his hotel room from the Falcks, Herter gives in completely to the urge to think through the Hitler problem. The reader is treated to a lengthy exposé of Herter's quasi-philosophical explanations of how and why Hitler came about, what it tells us about the German mentality, about the state of the world and the truth about good and evil. At the height of these meditations, while Maria is absent, Herter has a heart attack and the narration breaks off.

At this point Mulisch introduces a series of letters purportedly written by Eva Braun during the last days in the bunker of the *Reichskanzlei*. Theun de Vries, in an article in *De Volkskrant* (available as a dossier online) expressed his admiration for this section: "Knap is het laatste deel van de roman." The status of these letters, however, is problematic.

On p. 186 we read: "Niemand zal dit ooit lezen, want ik zal het natuurlijk tijdig laten verdwijnen. Stel je voor, de russen zouden het in handen krijgen." Later we read: "Steeds als ik een vel vol heb, verstop ik het in het luchtrooster" (211). And finally, "Als (Tornow) terugkomt zal ik hem vragen, dit manuscript te verbranden in de tuin." (208) How the manuscript survived is not indicated – *if* it survived, since it "exists" obviously in virtual reality only. Mulisch conjures it up without anyone's claiming responsibility – unless we attribute it, as Thomas Mann attributes the ringing of church bells in *Der Erwählte*, to the spirit of narration.

These letters explain the mystery of Siegfried's murder. Hitler makes the mistake of speaking in front of Bormann at Berchtesgaden about his ambitions to found a dynasty, and Himmler, who himself covets the succession to Hitler's rule, is moved to thwart Hitler. Informed by Bormann, Himmler proceeds to falsify the birth papers of Eva Braun's grandmother to indicate Jewish blood. Himmler knows Hitler well enough to be able to predict the result of his subterfuge: if Siegfried is one-eighth Jewish, he must be eliminated. It is only a few days before the final downfall, when Eva Braun's brother-in-law Fegelein is arrested and confesses his knowledge of the falsification, that the mystery is cleared up. Even the fact that Hitler has killed their son, however, does not prevent Eva Braun from marrying him. She reaches the limit of tolerance and understanding only when Hitler gives orders to kill all of his nine dogs.

It is important for the structure of the novel – if I may emphasize this fact once more – that this information is not available either to the Falcks or to Herter. It can therefore not be part of any assessment of Hitler *by them*. It is only the reader who, in retrospect, can exonerate Hitler for falling into the trap set by Himmler and Bormann, or, on the contrary, to feel further outrage about Hitler's rabid and irrational anti-Semitism. Undoubtedly, however, Mulisch brings off his sleight of hand with panache, and his choice of narrative technique – the indirect method of revelation – shows the old master.

*III Existing speculations about Hitler*

Before discussing Herter's interpretation of Hitler as it emerges from his ponderings in the hotel room – and ultimately Mulisch's own interpretation – it might be useful to make a few remarks about the main scholarly trends in the interpretation of Hitler – and here I acknowledge a heavy debt to Ron Rosenbaum's book *Understanding Hitler* (first published in 1996). I will not attempt here to discuss at length all the various Hitler interpretations contained in Rosenbaum's book. Instead I believe I can sum up the evidence he provides by suggesting that there are two main approaches to dealing with Hitler: the tendency to "humanize" him (= understanding him); and the tendency to demonize him (= placing him beyond understanding).

I will first turn to the method we might call "humanizing." This approach generally involves the depiction and outlining of certain character traits in Hitler:

1. Psychology leads to "understanding." The method is popular with disbelievers, since it

does not have a "moral" dimension: it is not "normative" but "descriptive" ("value-free") and hence rejects any reference to good and evil.

2. The phenomenal success of Hitler has often been blamed on mass delusion and hysteria. To be sure, this is not an uncommon historical phenomenon.[18]

3. Hitler may be seen as the product of history, and specifically of his times (the Depression, the rancour felt about the Versailles treaty, the weaknesses of the Weimar Republic), or as a product of German history in particular (nationalism, militarism, German arrogance, especially in the period after the Unification of 1870).

4. Social factors and structural problems may be referred to. Here we may note especially the Marxist interpretation, for example that of the Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács, who explains Hitler as the final outcome of a process of deteriorating capitalism.

5. Many explanations of the Hitler phenomenon pose the question of the responsibility of the Germans for both the War and the Holocaust – an uncomfortable theme.

The second approach to Hitler, as I suggested, is by "demonizing" him. This method is used to withdraw the Hitler phenomenon from the realm of "explanation" and "understanding." Some possibilities are:

1. Hitler is presented as "larger than life" – going well beyond the depiction of the traditional hero or villain.

2. Hitler is the embodiment of "absolute evil," he is, in the phrase used by George Steiner in his Hitler book, an "apparition from Hell."

3. Hitler is an example of "madness as evil," i.e. his "madness" is not a mental disease but an affliction, like the plague – it leads not to mad, but to "sinful" behaviour.[19]

4. Many scholars and writers insist on the "uniqueness" of Hitler. This argument is a double-edged sword, however: Hitler's deeds are so horrendous that they set the bar of evil incredibly high; but there is also a subtly comforting thought hidden here: his atrocities could never be repeated.

5. He is a one-time only phenomenon – not the "product" of anything.

6. He is a "phenomenon of nature," "inexplicable" like a hurricane or earthquake.

The crucial thing to remember about this way of looking at Hitler is that *nobody* is responsible – it just happened. Strangely enough, many Jewish writers have left the door open for this argument.

As Rosenbaum has suggested, all these interpretations are full of ambiguities, for they have more to do with the explainers than with the explanation. In addition, the methods employed by them are to a large extent predetermined by what they want to find.

How are these two main approaches to the Hitler phenomenon worked out in *fiction*? The answer is simple: Literature uses all the usual techniques

and possibilities at its disposal and applies them to these two main approaches.

1. There is an insistence on details – tics, gestures, speech patterns. These are often part of the effort towards "realism," but not necessarily so: they can also create caricature and exaggeration, or be inventions to colour our perception and judgment.

2. Anecdotes or stories bring out "essentials" about Hitler; this is in the tradition of those anecdotes about *der alte Fritz* (Frederick the Great of Prussia) once so popular in Germany.

3. Frequently, stories project Hitler into a possible/ virtual future or into an imaginary past. These invented situations are meant as *Denkspiele* to "test" the character of Hitler in such situations – a kind of "what if" game, or "virtual history" (*uchronie*). Clearly, Mulisch's novel falls into this category. Other examples are Beryl Bainbridge's *Young Adolf,* which deals with young Hitler's "lost year" by having him visit his sister Bridget in Manchester. In this story he is a bumbling, lazy character of whom it is said that he'll never amount to anything. In George Steiner's case Hitler has survived in the jungles of South America and is found there and turned over to the world court for judgment. Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt has Hitler pass his entrance exam to the Vienna Art Academy and then follows his parallel career.

4. Hitler is made the target of "humor." But this, too, may be an ambiguous stratagem, for turning Hitler into a clown may also be a kind of exorcism of his evil presence.[20]

Let us now look specifically at what emerges in the way of an explanation of the Hitler phenomenon in Mulisch's novel. In this case, however, we must first make a distinction between *Herter's* description of Hitler, and the ultimate portrait that *Mulisch* is aiming for. Why this distinction is important should become clear from my discussion.

*IV Herter's speculations about Hitler*

These speculations already start as asides during Falck's narration: they anticipate an explanation of Hitler, and are a kind of enjambment across the Falck story. Most strikingly, the first cluster occurs, as I have already indicated, around the birth date of Siegfried. In the episode in the hotel room, these speculations are given free rein. Again, I will not attempt to give a complete résumé of Herter's arguments, but simply summarize the main points.

Herter's speculations involve, first of all, a rejection of previous interpretations, be it by scholars or other authors. Instead, Herter returns to a notion, first introduced in an aside (93) about Rudolf Otto's characterization of religion as "het Totaal Andere" (160); Herter now makes a parallel case for Evil as the negative or obverse of that. Herter attempts to interpret Hitler as a kind of counterpoint to the negative theology of the 6th-century Neoplatonist called the Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita. Hitler is the Devil, but not in an orthodox sense. Rather, in a kind of reverse of the ontological proof of God developed by the 11th-century theologian Anselm of Canterbury, he is defined in quasi-Heideggerian terms as "de manifestatie van het niet-bestaande, nietigende Niets" (163).[21] Herter,

too, like so many demonizing thinkers, sees Hitler as a "meta-natuurverschijnsel," but also as the anti-Christ(177). Hitler, Herter argues, was a vacuum that pulled everything surrounding him into it, into a kind of black hole. In this view, he was not really guilty, because he was inhuman and value-less, and hence not subject to normal morality and judgment: "hij was uniek" (162). However, in contradiction to these "mystifying" statements, Herter continues to look for a "logical" explanation of the Hitler phenomenon,[22] and he looks for it in the history of Western and especially German philosophy, from Hegel via Kierkegaard to Heidegger, with stops along the way for Schopenhauer and especially Wagner and Nietzsche. In keeping with his customary arrogance (or is it really Mulisch's intellectual hubris?) he claims to have broken open the "Book with Seven Seals" regarding Hitler (156).

It is Nietzsche who becomes the linchpin for Herter's speculations, and if the reader is willing to follow Herter, he is rewarded with a grandiose pulling together of circumstantial evidence for the necessity and inevitability of Hitler's appearance. Herter suggests that there is a coincidence of dates between Nietzsche's beginning mental decline (1888) and the conceiving of Adolf Hitler, who was born on April 20, 1889. Moreover, Nietzsche's madness lasted exactly as long as Hitler's reign: 12 years. A further series of free associations leads Herter from prophetic announcements in Nietzsche's writings to statements by Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, and then on to Siegfried and the letter S, which he finds everywhere, even in the Café Sacher. A similar chain of associations involves the colour brown: Nietzsche plays with excrement in the clinic of the ironically – and really – named Dr. Wille, and of course there is Eva Braun, das Braune Haus in Munich, Braunau (Hitler's birthplace), the Brownshirts etc. etc. etc. At this point - one is almost tempted to say: fortunately - Herter has his heart attack.

What are we to make of these speculations? First, are they an *original* contribution to the Hitler debate? And secondly, to what extent are they *valid*? It is pretty clear that Mulisch does not have Herter invent very much in his general characterization of Hitler; in fact, having read Ron Rosenbaum's *Explaining Hitler*, published a few years before *Siegfried*, it seems to me that Herter's contribution is rather insignificant and in any case intuitive, unsystematic, and suggestive, rather than based on solid scholarship and theoretical and empirical evidence. But of course, *Siegfried* is a novel and not a work of scholarship. Or is it intended to be both? In that case, Dutch critics appear too easily convinced of the profundity of Mulisch's interpretation. Herter's speculations are clearly part of a tradition, albeit with minor variations. The "demonization" of Hitler, as we saw earlier, is one of the major trends of Hitler interpretations. Herter's variant, the explanation by way of negative theology, by and large fits into this tradition. This means, however, that it is subject to the same objections raised in general against the "demonizing" theory. In addition, the approaches Mulisch chooses resemble a number of others which have turned out to be problematic, two of which I would now like to look at more closely.

1. Demonization. The idea of the "demonic" is in line with a tendency, which has gained prominence since 1945, to reject the legacy of 18th-century rationalism and the accomplishments of the

Enlightenment in general. Demonization is the result of abstraction, rather than of analysis: since the monster leaves everything else in place, this way of looking at historical figures, casting them in the mould of the demonic or sacred, takes them out of history, which does not need to be rethought.

2. The cult of Hitler the Genius and unique Personality. The emphasis on the individual and the desire to explain history in terms of Hitler's personality poses a great danger: it is part of the "Great Men" theory which sees history as a product of individual great leaders and neglects or even denies the efforts of the collective. In a system so dependent on the concept of the *Volk*, this personality cult presents something of an irony. Of course this is also an irony of Communism; one has only to think of Lenin, Stalin and Mao to see the same contradictions at work. Some historians might argue of course that the great man can be seen as playing the role of symbol of the *general will*, in the sense that Rousseau used this term. One might even go further and see the great man as the embodiment of History itself. And this brings us to the question of whether we can make Hitler represent the German People at a precise moment in its history.[23]

Certainly this connection between the historical process and its incarnation in the Great Man would allow for a mythmaking process such as was practised by Hitler himself. In this context we might also have to consider the fact that in the case of Hitler it was not a coup or the establishment of a dictatorship from above, but a political process that brought Hitler to power. In other words, we must remember that Hitler was the choice of at least part of the German population. The consequences of Hitler's actions are therefore at least partially the responsibility of the Germans at large.

Is there a conflict here between Hitler as representative of the German people on the one hand, and as a "demon" on the other? In emphasizing the demon over the politician, is Herter (or Mulisch?) shifting the burden of guilt from the Germans to one person?

*V Herter under Hitler's spell*

Herter's speculations on Hitler's personality and on his role in history claim some kind of truth value. Herter implicitly and explicitly rejects the efforts by others to understand Hitler: he in fact claims that he is the first person in history to do so. But what kind of truth is Herter after? Is it an objective truth, such as historians seek? Or is it a personal, much more subjective truth that fulfills some function other than one inspired by science and objectivity? The latter seems to me to be the case. For even if Herter were to believe that other opinions about Hitler were outdated and wrong, should he not ask how his evaluation of Hitler squares with what he has just heard in the story told by the Falcks? If this story is such an eye-opener for him, if he is so overwhelmed by it – which is what we are supposed to think, so that we too are impressed and shocked – is it not curious that there is so little assessment of the Falck story itself, the "inner story," after Herter returns to his hotel? Why does Herter not give an opinion on what he has just heard about Hitler, instead of beginning his interpretation of Hitler exactly where he left off his previous considerations (in the first part of the novel)?

From a technical point of view, this could of course be explained by the fact that he has given his word not to divulge what he has heard, and therefore there is no record kept. We, the readers, have been given privileged information, which, however, exists only in the overarching narrative itself. Within the novel's closed world (the Vienna episode and even beyond) the status of the story is one of abeyance and potentiality only. In fact, at the center of Mulisch's novel is a black hole, which perhaps corresponds with the "black hole" created by Hitler (the "absence" in his presence). If Herter dies before telling the story, then the story has literally "disappeared" and the truth about Hitler escapes him and us. Herter's calculations have clearly gone awry, because he counted on surviving the Falcks. In a very real sense, Herter is cheated (perhaps by the Devil?) out of his victory over Hitler.[24]

This leaves us to ask what exactly the story told by the Falcks contributes to Herter's understanding of Hitler. Is the story a confirmation of his previously held convictions, or are these convictions modified by the story?[25]

Herter does not question the Falck story as such, but at the same time he does not appear to draw any conclusions from it, other than those that can confirm his own already existing convictions. He assumes that his own view coincides with the image presented in the Falck story, but in fact a closer look at the two sections side by side suggests that there are considerable, perhaps irreconcilable differences between them. Moreover, there are contradictions even within the two narratives themselves. I give here the most important instances.

Of necessity, the Falck episode shows Hitler from the outside, as do all novels about him; he does not reveal himself, he hardly speaks and remains a rather shadowy figure. He is shown, however, as a tender, gentle family man, a lover of children and dogs, and as a courteous employer (until the final order!), though to be fair, Mulisch does not de-Nazify him. With what intention is this image presented? Since it is produced by those close to the source, the Falcks, who manifestly have no devious interest in promoting it, are we therefore enjoined to give it special status?

Presenting Hitler as a "private" person, as a father, lover, and employer is problematic to the highest degree, as a number of historians have suggested.[26] Whenever we are given glimpses of a "normal" Hitler, we are caught in the bind of having to grant him some humanity, which clearly goes against the contrasting claim of his demonic character. He was, the argument goes, a human being after all; but does this not automatically create some degree of sympathy? When the *public* Hitler image is being exploded, especially by Julia's mocking comments, is the final intention a humanizing of Hitler, or the admission of an incompatibility of competing images? Is "humanizing" aimed at debunking and demythicizing?

The argument could be made that by humanizing and debunking Hitler, Mulisch is interpreting his ascent into prominence not as the product of metaphysical processes, or of his demonic personality, or of some mystical or mythical aura, but rather as resulting from a concrete human/political/social process. In that case, of course,

personal involvement also implies personal responsibility. It seems to me that Mulisch does not confront this question squarely. We might compare his wavering portrait of Hitler with Brecht's unequivocal treatment of him in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, in which the Nazis are presented as a bunch of Chicago gangsters and Hitler's rise to power is explained entirely (and correctly) in terms of very human and tacky manipulations. By comparison with Brecht, Mulisch seems to find it difficult to decide. But what does this say for the claims that attach to Herter's project? What rate of success can he count on, if the contrast between *zijn* and *schijn* – between public and private, myth and reality – is so obvious? It does not bode well for his enterprise.

Moreover, the ambivalence inherent in the portrait of Hitler drawn by the Falcks is repeated by the conflict between their story and Herter's speculations. Let me elaborate.

In the inner story, despite its horrible crime, Hitler is primarily described as an "ordinary," slightly vulgar and partly ridiculous man. In Herter's speculations Hitler is seen in terms of a double myth: the one Hitler himself invented, and the one promoted by posterity. There is another problem here. On the one hand we are invited to consider Hitler from a point of view of "negative theology," which intends to erase any traces of socio-political-historical factors, and to concentrate on the pure "phenomenon." On the other hand, Hitler is also in some ways seen as the "product" of a long tradition in European, but especially German, culture and philosophy, and to some extent therefore as himself "driven" by the forces of history. Or perhaps by the Devil. How are these multiple images to be reconciled?[27]

Mulisch himself seems to have been conscious of these ambiguities. While attempting to characterize Hitler during his conversation with the Falcks, Herter warns, "dat we hem niet vergoddelijken, al is het dan met een negatief voorteken" – which is precisely what he does later on. No trepidation stops him from tackling the "demon" Hitler once he has returned to his hotel room. He is a man with a mission, "alsof ook hijzelf een gezondene was uit het Totaal Andere" (93) – sent by Good to battle Evil.

Herter has fallen under Hitler's spell. He started out by playing and calculating, even adopting a kind of frivolous tone in his meditations about Hitler, Germany and History (a decidedly post-modern attitude), as I pointed out earlier. But in his speculations on returning to his hotel, the tone changes: there is a shift from history to philosophy, from description to interpretation. Herter has fallen into his own trap. The association with Hitler leads to a kind of "demonization" of himself.[28] Just as those around Hitler came to accept the version of him that Hitler himself promoted, so perhaps does Herter. Ultimately, Herter is overcome by his "mission" and he believes in it to the point of having a vision, of becoming a victim of the dark forces behind the Hitler figure, when he dies of a heart attack.

There remains the question whether Herter's sudden death is intended to give this interpretation of Hitler a privileged status and a special authority. I am not only asking the question whether we are to extrapolate from the evidence left on the Dictaphone that the Devil (or Hitler) has made

an "appearance" at the end; that is a matter of taste and attitude. No, the far more fundamental question is whether Herter's enterprise is to be considered successful, whether he has now arrived at a valid, definitive interpretation of Hitler. The answer must be an unequivocal "no." The multiple images of Hitler within the Falcks' story, and those resulting from the conflict between that story and Herter's speculations (the outer frame of the novel), make it impossible to arrive at such a definitive portrait.

Even more to the point, the effort to "explain" Hitler was flawed from the start if, as Herter states on several occasions, Hitler is unique and pertains to "het Totaal Andere." Negative theology is defined by the *absence* of definitions, and consequently, as Herter himself has already concluded, "Als Hitler de aanbeden en vervloekte personificatie van niets was ( . . . ) dan was zijn ware gezicht ook niet door een literaire spiegel zichtbaar te maken" (93).[29] It is rather Herter who seems to be caught in a net.

And what of Mulisch the mythmaker himself? Are we allowed to consider Herter's rather obscure and obscuring speculations as the definitive word on Hitler by Mulisch himself, the "key" to understanding him? Is this Mulisch's final word on a figure and on a period that has clearly haunted him all his life?

This is a basic question, one which touches on authorial intention, on Mulisch's own stance. For in asking about the intentions of Herter's projected book on Hitler, we come close to equating his project with that of Mulisch himself, in other words with the text that we hold in our hands.

The Herter narrative, in its return to the view of Hitler as a demon, suggests to me that the fictitious author continues a mythmaking process that is at the heart of Mulisch's own project. It appears to me not at all far-fetched to suggest that through Herter, Mulisch ventilates to a large extent his own version of the Hitler myth, though at the same time he uses an odd sort of irony to undermine the seriousness of his proposals. That he has some commonality with Herter in this mythmaking tendency would only reinforce the parallels suggested in the self-aggrandizing introductory chapters, in which the thinly veiled autobiographical references seem to attempt to create a kind of myth about himself – a typical trait of this author, who is often considered conceited and arrogant.

One way of looking at Herter is to come back to a remark he makes after having heard the Hitler story from the Falcks. Till then he had intended to use a neutral figure (the theologian Rudolf Otto) as a distancing device for his story.[30] In actual fact, we could say that Herter himself instead has been used (by Mulisch) as the distancing device, an ironic-perverted stand-in for himself.[31] The Dutch critics cited on the *flaptekst* of my edition take the equation Herter/Mulisch for granted. But they do not draw the consequences I see as inevitable, namely that since the image of Hitler remains confused and contradictory, Herter's and Mulisch's missions both fail. Herter fails because he starts from the wrong premise: he attempts to give a face to Nothingness. Mulisch's mistake, on the other hand, lies in the construction of the novel itself: by combining a humanizing and a demonizing treatment of the figure of Hitler, Mulisch falls into an interpretational trap.

In this Mulisch is by no means alone. As Alvin Rosenberg writes, most books on Hitler "both exalt the image of Hitler by casting it in terms that intrigue and excite the imagination and neutralize it by making the man seem so ordinary." Either way, they miss the mark: "Those works that demonize him distort through tropological excess, making him into a creature altogether unlike any to be found in humankind, whereas those works that normalize him tend to minimize his wickedness and diminish or deny his destructive side. Between these contrasting images of the demonic and the domestic figure, the "real" Hitler, one feels, somehow gets lost or slips away" (p. xx).

By not recognizing – or in fact by creating – the unresolved conflicts between inner story and outer frame, as well as by muddying the waters even within these separate narratives, Mulisch has failed, just as much as Herter, to "[break] open the book with the seven seals" as he claims to have done. The various parts of the book have ultimately not been joined in such a way as to advance our understanding of Hitler, nor do they, in an aesthetic sense, make a satisfactory unity.[32] Alvin Rosenfeld declares that "At least on the evidence of literature that has been given us to date, no representation of Hitler, highbrow or low, seems able adequately to present the man or satisfactorily to explain him." (p. xx) We are forced to conclude that Mulisch cannot do so either.

It is interesting to note that in the mostly positive reception of Mulisch's book there is no indication that any of the problems I raise here were perceived as such. The distinction between the fictional author Herter and the real author Mulisch – a basic one in any study of a work of fiction – is more or less lost in the comments by Dutch critics quoted on the cover of the book and those I have read. In the final analysis, of course, as far as the so-called "ideas" are concerned, this might turn out to be correct – but for the wrong reasons. Nor does it become clear whether the contribution of Mulisch's novel to the Hitler myth is based on the inner story (Falck), the frame (Herter's speculations) or on the tension between them. Thus, Jan Paul Bresser in *Elsevier* writes: "Zo krijgt de werkelijkheid door verbeelding in het soevereine laboratorium van Harry Mulisch zijn fascinerende slagkracht." Note the paradoxical juxtaposition here of reality and imagination: it is claimed that the imagination gives reality its force – a rather perverse idea about literature and its potential. Herman Jacobs in *De Morgen* speaks of "De mythe die doodt." If I read this correctly, the myth here is Adolf Hitler. Not only does Jacobs fully accept Mulisch's equation of Hitler with his myth, but it is the "myth", not the man, who kills – a particularly devious shift of responsibility.

Closer to the core of the story is, by contrast, the comment by Job Cohen, the burgomaster of Amsterdam: "U heeft van Hitler willen winnen, door hem te begrijpen, conceptueel in de tang te nemen, zijn "wezen" te benoemen en daarmee vast te spijkeren tegen de deuren van de hel. Dat is spelen met vuur, er hangt iets van een schroeilucht in uw boek ..." This is especially interesting in that it accepts Mulisch's achievement with a feeling that this is a *tour de force* but at the same time that, as the Germans say, "es geht nicht mit rechten Dingen zu." And indeed, there are fundamental questions about literature, reality, and morality raised by this book. I would like to conclude by indicating what some of these questions are.

*VI The writer's responsibility*

Some technical questions first: Is there unlimited freedom in treating historical figures? In demanding that the historical character be consistent with what we know, we set up some kind of truth claim. Is this a purely aesthetic problem, or does it have a moral dimension – to do with the responsibility of authorship and literature?

What is the role of the reader (the "implied" reader of Wolfgang Iser) in the construction and deconstruction of the character? Does it differ in the case of a known/"real" figure? Phrased differently, would Mulisch's novel be of interest if the character were not Adolf Hitler? Would Beryl Bainbridge's be, if we did not know the book is supposedly about the young Hitler? How does the ability to compare with the "facts" enhance the reading experience, and in what way does it limit the reader?

In deciding to write about Hitler, is it Mulisch's intention to advance our understanding? Is his text a form of enlightenment, or does he use the genre of the fictive biography, and the possibilities of "virtual history" and literature, as a game?

Let me pursue this last point a little further. Assuming that Mulisch did want to use the genre as a cognitive instrument (be it "een denk-experiment" or "een fantasieën-experiment" as he claims in the case of Herter's scheme), how does the novel contribute to our understanding of Hitler? As we have seen, little of what is introduced in the frame of the novel is unfamiliar or controversial. In fact, the image of Hitler is a composite of most of the writings of the last 50 years on him, with at times rather heavy borrowings from, among others, Hugh Trevor-Roper, George Steiner, Emil Fackenheim and Yehuda Bauer. (Whether Mulisch read all of these authors is beside the point, their ideas are in the air and summarized in many places). Indeed, Mulisch has invented nothing but the Hitler of the "inner story"; it is Mulisch's contribution to "virtual history" that remains his most original contribution, and the one that has most impressed the critics and reading public.

But two objections may be raised which tend to diminish this contribution. First, from a technical point of view, for the purpose of "virtual history," the invented incident does not have any real relevance. Since Siegfried does not live beyond the reign of Hitler, unlike in some novels, there are no consequences, it is indeed "alsof hij nooit bestaan heeft." More importantly, the invented incident does not fundamentally alter the reader's view of Hitler. Mulisch sets an important new accent in the central episode of Falck's story in that perhaps for the first time in fiction we encounter Hitler as the killer of a specific child – his own. But let us not forget that he does not kill the child himself. Walter Falck, although a most "unwilling executioner," is the representative of all those others who acted as proxies for the mass murder of children. Falck is not guilty, but the incident shows – in a *pars pro toto* – the mechanism in place, and Hitler's own role in it.

Mulisch might have argued that the imagination cannot grasp the "metaphysical" dimension of evil of the Holocaust, or of state terrorism on a massive scale, but that we *can* understand the enormity of

this one crime. The demonstration of evil from one case, the argument then goes, is more effective than the depiction of the murder of millions. But is this case *worse* than the reality already proven? Does this murder of Siegfried make Hitler less guilty of the other crimes, or augment his guilt in an essential way? Do we really need the focus on a single case of murder, and an invented one at that? Is the case against Hitler not strong enough apart from this imaginary event? Surely there is no need to invent such a crime, since the real crimes already exist. Is it the intention of Mulisch to obfuscate and take away focus from Hitler's real crimes? If not, what is he doing? Maria's question, "hoe kun je een extremere situatie verzinnen dan die hij zelf heeft verzonnen en verwerkelijkt?" comes back to haunt Mulisch here.

In the total scheme of the novel, I would therefore argue, Mulisch's "invention," his "denk-fantasie," does not even cause a fundamental reassessment of Hitler as we already know him. But it is the only semi-original contribution (the idea of a son has been bandied about in various places much earlier, but Mulisch at least has worked the story out in full).[33]

On the other hand, if Mulisch's novel is a sort of post-modern game rather than an instrument of enlightenment, we might well ask the more fundamental question: is history simply a museum or warehouse of themes, characters and situations, from which we can draw at will? The post-modernists would argue that the Hitler of historical scholarship is only marginally less fictional than the Hitler of novels: this is the problem of the "textuality of history" of the New Historicism. Because Hitler is a "construct" he therefore becomes "available" for other uses. On this, a number of post-modernist novelists agree. According to E. L. Doctorow, for example, "There is no longer any such thing as fiction or non-fiction, there's only narrative" (quoted by Rosenfeld, 106). William Styron (of *Sophie's Choice*) has written: "A novelist dealing with history has to be able to say that such and such a fact is totally irrelevant, and to Hell with the person who insists that it has any real, utmost relevance . . . a brute, an idiotic preoccupation with crude fact is death to a novel, and death to the novelist." And finally, I quote Anthony Burgess: "The novelist is a confidence trickster, while it is the task of the scholar to teach skepticism." (Rosenfeld, xvii) Such statements make an interesting comparison with Virginia Woolf's dictum, in *A Room of One's Own*: "Fiction must stick to the facts, and the truer the facts the better the fiction, so we are told."

Of course this is a paradoxical remark. What are these facts? Are they empirical facts? Data of history, "bits of reality," or "logical" facts, facts of "consistency"? What kind of truth-claim is Woolf after? What kind of truth-claim can fiction make? What is the correspondence between "fact" – however understood – and "fiction"? Is it correct to speak of "moral" responsibility towards the "real" world on the part of the author, *beyond* the responsibility for some aesthetic truth, as such disparate practitioners as Hermann Broch and Sartre claim? Is the writer's responsibility towards the world merely one of "realism" and faithfulness to "(human) nature," or does it demand also some kind of moral stance, a starting point for ethics as action? Theun de Vries puts the finger on this problem when he writes:

> Mulisch' vondst is niet alledaags en levert hem wat vernuft en vindingrijkheid betreft een hoog cijfer op. Het is alleen verduiveld jammer voor de miljoenen slachtoffers van deze singulariteit, de joden en hun kinderen, de zigeuners, de soldaten en verzetsstrijders, om van een paar miljoen burgers te zwijgen, dat zij hun leven hebben moeten offeren op het altaar van deze onderwereldgod, die zich bij zijn leven minder als een ontologische onachterhaalbaar verschijnsel heeft gedragen dan als een krankzinnige mensenverdelger. In dit opzicht moet men Mulisch de vraag stellen of er niet een element van verfijnde Spielerei in zijn hele Hitler-definitie steekt: waar blijft Herters afrekening met het misdrijf als het misdrijf reeds heeft plaatsgevonden?

Is playing with history, and more specifically playing with Hitler, indeed playing with fire, as George Steiner once stated and Job Cohen suggested ("Dat is spelen met vuur, er hangt iets van een schroeilucht in uw boek ..."). Herter has a mission, but there is a profound ambiguity about it, for must he not, like all interpreters of Hitler, do Hitler's bidding, just as, in the words of Hermann Broch, the Devil must do God's bidding? Does not Herter, in continuing the myth-making process about Hitler, accept the Nazi creed and its attempts to mythologize the Hitler figure? We do well to remember what Alvin Rosenfeld has written: "While there are creative advantages to this kind of composition, there are also dangers, paramount among them the danger of imaginative possession by other minds" (101). In other words, readers may come under the spell of such treatments, very much the way Herter falls under the spell of an imagined Hitler. Myths do not depend on evidence; as the eminent British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper asserted, "reason is powerless against the obstinate love of fiction" (quoted by Rosenfeld, 3). All the more reason to weigh the ethical against the aesthetic values.

Mulisch himself seems to have anticipated this dilemma in the novel itself, for at one point he implies that not only the process of mythmaking, but more generally art itself, may be in conflict with humane and moral demands. While watching a TV programme on nature in which an innocent animal is killed, Herter suddenly feels that the cameraman should have interfered and rescued the animal; unfortunately, he is only interested in the beautiful image. Clearly, the temptation to re-create an icon as pre-eminent as Hitler proved too strong not only for Herter, but for Mulisch himself.

The challenge of dealing with Hitler as a figure in literature is a pervasive one, and undoubtedly pride of authorship, as well as the legitimizing power of literature, even the arrogance of authors, are all involved in the process. This arrogance comes out in statements about the relationship between fact and fiction by authors who have written fictional history and fictional biographies in the "post-modern mode," and Mulisch himself would probably agree with them. Although we must not accuse Mulisch of crimes he does not commit (he does not claim his story is fact, his fiction is clearly recognizable as such, e.g. by the use of "framing" and by third person narrative rather than authorial claims) yet even while the book is "only a story," does it not provide an interpretation, and is any interpretation ultimately not in Hitler's service?

By extension, therefore, does not Mulisch himself, in writing about Hitler, serve him? Is Mulisch, in Fackenheim's words, making Hitler's posthumous victory possible? Any re-creation of Hitler, especially when well done, lets him continue to stalk us. Hence the fear of George Steiner about his own book, which gave Hitler literally the last word, and in which Steiner's eloquence ran away with him to the disadvantage of his basic anti-fascist attitude. We might also remember the anger Claude Lanzmann has shown about any explanation of the Holocaust and of Hitler, because in his mind "understanding" inevitably leads to "exculpation."[34] A side-glance at Holocaust literature in fact proves helpful here.

Not only has it become possible (against Theodor Adorno's claim) to write literature *after* Auschwitz, it is even possible to write literature *about* Auschwitz. What problems may thereby be raised becomes clear if we look at a highly acclaimed example, the 2002 Nobel-Prize winner Imre Kertész's novel *Fateless* (1975). Apart from the question of whether it is the literary quality of this novel or the particular moral viewpoint presented which gained it such high praise – a question which is highly problematic when dealing with the Holocaust – the subject matter itself is highly ambiguous. The novel, poised on the razor's edge between document and fiction, presents a first-person narrator as an innocent who attempts to understand the Nazi system and its executioners. The victim appears to interiorize the values of his oppressor. If in essence this is the characteristic of the novel that stands out, and which has made the claim for literature and the Nobel Prize feasible, we should remember that *tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*. Especially when taking into account the prestige and the potential effects of literature, one may well feel a degree of uneasiness towards all fictional treatments of a period of history still so much alive in many minds, and still, in the opinion of many, *unbewältigt* and far from superseded.

My task in this article was to remain skeptical. I have read a number of Hitler novels, with an equal amount of fascination and reservation about the authors and indeed about the genre itself. If my present interest in this subject holds, I have the assurance that at least my materials will not run out, for as Alvin Rosenfeld writes (p. 112): "He will not go away soon. As *fact*, the "Thousand Year Reich" lasted little more than a decade, but as *fiction* it goes on and on." And he continues in the words of Horst Krüger, "this Hitler has played a trick on us (. . . ) this Hitler remains with us – all the days of our lives."

**APPENDIX :** SOME EXAMPLES OF FICTIONAL TREATMENT OF NAZISM, THE HOLOCAUST AND *HITLER

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*Bonker, Francis. The Mad Dictator. A Novel of Adolf Hitler. Boston: Chapman & Grimes, 1950.

*Bradbury, Ray. "Darling Adolf." In: Long After Midnight. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.

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Roth, Philip. *The Ghost Writer.* New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1979.
*Schmitt, Eric-Emmanuel. La Part de l"autre. Paris: Albin Michel, 2001.
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NOTES

[1] Alvin Rosenfeld, *Imagining Hitler*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana U.P., 1985.

[2] Ian Kershaw. *Hitler*. London: Penguin Books. Vol. 1 – *Hubris* (1889-1936), Vol. 2 – *Nemesis* (1936-1945).

[3] Ian Kershaw, *The 'Hitler Myth.' Image and Reality in the Third Reich.* Oxford U.P., 1987.

[4] Harry Mulisch, *Siegfried. Een zwarte Idylle.* Amsterdam: De bezige bij, 2001. All references in the text are to this edition.

[5] Herter is or has been married to Olga and has a child, Marnix.

[6] In my Appendix, I provide a partial list of fictional works concerned with The Second World War, the Holocaust, and with Hitler.

[7] For an amusing discussion of the latter term see Emmanuel Carrère, *Le Détroit de Behring*, Paris: P.O.I. Éditeur, 1986.

[8] Schwarz, Daniel R. *Imagining the Holocaust.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

[9] There are references to partial deafness, a heart attack, visits to Cuba and Jerusalem etc.

[10] "Allemaal Mulischiaanse zelfspot, natuurlijk, en goed getroffen zelfspot bovendien. Wie wil, kan met het zoeken naar overeenkomsten tussen Herter en zijn bedenker een aardig avondje doorbrengen" (Theun de Vries, Mulisch-Dossier in *De Volkskrant*).

[11] Dutch critics, who already have an axe to grind about Mulisch, have been split about whether these passages are more evidence of this author's arrogance, or are instead instances of tongue-in-cheek. Theun de Vries, for example, writes: "Men heeft mij willen verzekeren dat het hier om een ironisch zelfportret van Mulisch zou gaan, maar ik moet dan wel zeggen dat het een ironie betreft waar de rek uit is."

[12] If we were to read into this remark a statement about Mulisch's own "calling," this would truly be mythmaking on a grand scale! Partly this is pure bravura and arrogance, of course; but it is useful to keep this claim in mind when interpreting the totality of the novel.

[13] Once again, the "trivializing" and playful note that seems inappropriate for the subject comes to

the fore at this point – and this feeling increases (at least in my reading of it).

[14] Among those approaches he discards are the relationship between Dürer and Hitler (already done by Thomas Mann) (27) or Hitler visiting a concentration camp, which would be out of character (30).

[15] One incident in particular stands out: Hitler has had a nightmare and is completely devastated by it. In the words of Walter Falck: "Nooit zal ik vergeten wat hij zei: Hij ... hij ... hij was hier" (99]). This episode is echoed at the very end of Herter's own narrative recorded on the Dictaphone.

[16] It took someone like Mulisch to come up with it!

[17] Siegfried was born on a November 9th, the same date as the Kristallnacht, the day in 1918 that the German Kaiser abdicated, the day in 1923 of the failed Putsch in Munich, and the day the Berlin Wall came down in 1988. It was 66 years after Hitler's first appearance on the scene, and 666 is the sign of the Beast (all this p. 114).

[18] A number of psychologists have attempted to establish a link between the personality of Hitler and a perceived crisis of the German psyche. See, for example Erich Fromm, *Die Furcht vor der Freiheit*, Zurich 1945, and his *The Mass Psychology of Fascism (Die Massenpsychologie des Faschismus)*, originally published 1946. See also Theodor W. Adorno et al.: *The Authoritarian Personality. Studies in Prejudice*, New York, 1950. Such studies are generally based on Freud's *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse* of 1921. Elias Canetti, in his *Masse und Macht* (1960), provides an alternative to Freudian concepts about the relationship of the individual and the masses; his discussion, though not immediately referring to the Hitler period, undoubtedly has its ramifications as a subtext. My reference is to a much older work, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* by Charles Mackay, published in 1841 and 1852.

[19] It is interesting to note that in contemporary debates about politics the concept of "sin" and of "evil" is coming back; see the "evil empire" of Ronald Reagan, or the "axis of evil" of George W. Bush.

[20] Again, this phenomenon can be observed in our own day: when Saddam Hussein was captured, the media kept showing him with his mouth wide open for an examination of his teeth – the "beast" was tamed and no longer dangerous – he was also humiliated (at a safe distance for us).

[21] Again, is Mulisch making fun of his reader here? What is his attitude towards Heidegger? His admiration for things German is certainly tempered by a rejection of some of the worst manifestations of German culture, and therefore he has a mixed bag of opinions.

[22] Critics have generally overlooked the contradiction involved here.

[23] See the chapter entitled "Symbol of the Nation'. The Propaganda Profile of Hitler, 1933-1936," in Ian Kershaw's The "Hitler-Myth" pp. 48-82.

[24] Who then tells the story? Mulisch of course, which justifies our asking beyond Herter's

perspective.

[25] In fact, it seems that the Falck story merely interrupts Herter's train of thought. This is clear, for example, from the use Herter makes of one of the most celebrated definitions of Hitler, as a "mysterium tremendum ac fascinans" – a definition to which Herter returns in the second part of the frame, where we learn that it was coined by the theologian Rudolf Otto (94) in *Das Heilige* (159). The importance of the definition is, moreover, increased by its transfer to Herter himself, who now sees himself as also belonging to the realm of "het Totaal Andere."

[26] The debate was most recently revived after the release of the film *The Downfall* (*Der Untergang*).

[27] It is obvious that the letters by Eva Braun, which I do not discuss in detail, provide yet other instances of a humanizing tendency, this time with good reasons. Eva Braun's portrait of Hitler, inspired by blind devotion, makes of the feared dictator her beloved "Adi." Here too we find Hitler in all his human-all-too-human aspect, with stains on his uniform, cake crumbs in his moustache (193) and chocolate in the corner of his mouth (183), plagued by stomachaches, and with tears in his eyes for his lost dream of petty bourgeois retirement in Linz.

[28] Early on in the novel, Herter calls himself, like Hitler, "een natuurverschijnsel" (33).

[29] This would contradict Jeroen Vullings's claim in *Vrij Nederland*: "Hitler zit nu gevangen binnen de muren van de fictie. Voor eeuwig."

[30] Something in the line of Thomas Mann's Zeitblom in *Doktor Faustus*.

[31] Perverted, because of the playing with the biographical details. In this context we may enquire about the effect of working Herter's invention into a kind of detective story which, in addition to introducing a persona modeled on Mulisch's own, reproduces a number of Mulisch's own preoccupations and even includes a more or less complete treatise on his novelistic aesthetics. Ironic, because ultimately Herter's project, like that of so many others, is doomed to failure.

[32] Theun de Vries wrote: "Je zou wensen dat Mulisch zich Herter's opmerking over de eenheid van vorm en inhoud zelf ter harte had genomen."

[33] See Alvin Rosenfeld for further treatments of Hitler, including the discovery of a son (110) and by Konrad Kujau, a West German forger, now in jail, who promised to produce Hitler's daughter!

[34] See the chapter entitled "Claude Lanzmann and the War Against the Question Why" in Rosenbaum, 251-266.