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Between Past and Future. Transfiguration and Twenty-First- -Century Holocaust Literature

Bettine Siertsema

Fictional Representations of Hitler

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The figure of Adolf Hitler is no taboo as a trope in literary fiction. Scholars Alvin Rosenfeld,¹ Gavriel Rosenfeld,² Michael Butter,³ and Joanne Pettitt⁴ offer a significant body of scholarship on representations of Hitler as a character in fiction, with American and British novels and short stories as their prime field of investigation. Of the 29 fictional works on Hitler that Gavriel Rosenfeld lists, including films, theatre and TV plays, and comics, only four are not in English. Pettitt discusses 13 works in English and only one in German. Michael Butter focuses exclusively on American fiction. With his study of French Hitler fiction, Manuel Bragança offers some

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- 1 Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *Imagining Hitler* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).
 - 2 Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
 - 3 Michael Butter, *The Epitome of Evil: Hitler in American Fiction 1939-2000* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
 - 4 Joanne Pettitt, *Perpetrators in Holocaust Narratives: Encountering the Nazi Beast* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

counterweight to this American dominance by investigating French literature on Hitler.⁵ This article aims to broaden the discussion to a transnational perspective. It discusses five non-American novels from the twenty-first century, namely Hans Keilson's *The Death of the Adversary* from Germany (and/or the Netherlands, because from his mid-twenties, the author lived in the Netherlands),⁶ Harry Mulisch's *Siegfried* from the Netherlands, A.N. Wilson's *Winnie and Wolf* from the United Kingdom, Timur Vermes's *Look Who's Back* from Germany, and Lavie Tidhar's *A Man Lies Dreaming* from Israel (and/or the United Kingdom, where he has lived since 2013). Apart from the timeframe, the twenty-first century, and the exclusion of American and French literature, as they have already been covered by previous research (see below), this selection of five is mainly based on their potentially global range, and thus on their being published in or translated into English. No doubt in Eastern-European literatures, as well as in Spanish, Greek, and Italian, other examples can be found, but their readership is limited, and their accessibility is problematic for researchers who do not master those languages.

Overview of Previous Research

In *The World that Hitler Never Made*, Gavriel Rosenfeld interprets the four stages in the publication of alternate Hitler histories as a process of increasing normalization of the Nazi past. These stages are: the 1950s, with fantasies about bringing Hitler to justice, the 1960–1970s after the Adolf Eichmann trial, the late 1970s and the 1980s after the “Hitler Wave,” which focused attention on Hitler’s private life, and the 1990s onwards, with a comic approach to Hitler in a reunited Germany. This trend continues well into the twenty-first century, as Rosenfeld shows in his more recent book *Hi Hitler*.⁷ Rosenfeld contends that the increasing normalization, humanization and de-demonization in Hitler fiction reflect the willingness “to view the Führer in non-judgmental terms.”⁸ Authors also universalized Hitler by drawing parallels with contemporary evils, which Rosenfeld seems to disapprove of as a diminishing of attention for Nazism in its historical specificity.

5 Manuel Bragança, *Hitler's French Literary Afterlives 1945–2017* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

6 Actually, the novel was first published in 1959, but it gained a much larger readership and general acclaim in 2010, as will be related in the relevant section below.

7 Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler! How the Nazi Past is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

8 Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made*, 236.

One of Michael Butter's findings in *The Epitome of Evil: Hitler in American Fiction 1939–2000* is that the realist mode of representation aims to show the moral superiority of America, whereas the later postmodern approach is less based on the good–evil dichotomy. In her chapter on Hitler in *Perpetrators in Holocaust Narratives*, Joanne Pettitt discerns two opposing trends: one towards mythologizing and demonizing Hitler, placing him outside history and even outside humanity, and one towards humanizing him. She largely agrees with Rosenfeld that texts in this latter trend run the risk of trivializing him. On the one hand she acknowledges that seeing the Holocaust perpetrator, in this case Hitler, as the embodiment of evil, as the mythologizers do, stands in the way of a better understanding of their motivations. On the other hand, in the process of humanization, she identifies the creation of a “space for justifications and normalization.”⁹

Neither Rosenfeld nor Pettitt expresses the view that humanizing Hitler can offer a more disturbing representation than a demonic Hitler because it puts our own way of being into question. Michael Butter aptly asserted: “To call the historical Hitler evil forecloses explanation.”¹⁰ It is easy to relegate Hitler and the people who followed him to the outskirts of history and humanity by demonizing him/them. Showing a shared humanity with him invokes deeper probing, unsettling questions about the nature of evil and of being human. This strategy may be ethically more valuable than shrugging Hitler off as an otherworldly monster, as the more traditional, demonizing portrayals do.

Bragança concludes that the Vichy situation led to a difference in approach: “It is not towards alternative histories/stories that French novelists turned their attention after 1968 but towards Vichy. Consequently, Hitler only appears intermittently in these novels, before and after 1968. In other words, Hitler never became France’s ‘significant other’ as he did in American culture. In fact, Hitler has hardly ever been the ‘other’ of other characters in French fiction; on the contrary, he has increasingly become a ‘significant self’ in French novels since the 1970s.”¹¹

Erin McGlothlin designed a taxonomy of readers’ empathic identifications with Holocaust perpetrators in fiction.¹² The autodiegetic narration of Nazi perpetrators, in which the perpetrator is the I-narrator, emphasizes the humanity of these protagonists. McGlothlin acknowledges the possibility, or

9 Pettitt, *Perpetrators in Holocaust Narratives*, 118.

10 Butter, *Epitome*, 10.

11 Bragança, *French Afterlives*, 118.

12 Erin McGlothlin, “Empathic Identification, and the Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction: A Proposed Taxonomy of Response,” *Narrative* 24 (3), (October 2016): 251–276.

risk, that readers identify with the perpetrator-narrator, because he is constructed as an object of empathy. She arrives at a kind of hierarchy of five possible modes of identification: existential, perspectival, reliability-dependent, affective and ideological. She argues that representations of the perpetrators' consciousness ask of us to align with their perspectives, even as we are aware of their reprehensible actions. Yet they do not necessarily compel the reader to absolve perpetrators from their crimes.

However, only one of the novelists discussed here, Timur Vermes, presents Hitler as the autodiegetic narrator of the story. In a large part of Lavie Tidhar's novel he is the focalizer, thus causing the reader to feel s/he has at least some access to the character's mind. But the narrative situation is complex and does not allow us to accept the views of the Hitler character at face value (more on that later). Mulisch and Keilson do not allow Hitler any direct speech; Wilson does, but to a rather limited extent. In short, four of the five novels under discussion here offer too little focalization by the Hitler character to fit into McGlothlin's taxonomy. Only for *Look Who's Back* it does offer a method to investigate the (implied) reader's response.

The following sections are in chronological order as per the publication date.

Hans Keilson, *The Death of the Adversary*¹³

The first Hitler fiction appeared in the United States during the war. For obvious reasons this was not possible in Germany or the occupied countries. Yet Hans Keilson (1909–2011) wrote part of *The Death of the Adversary* as early as 1941. Born in Germany, Keilson studied medicine, but as a Jew he was forbidden to practice as a doctor. In 1936 he fled to the Netherlands. He went into hiding in 1941, but also participated in the resistance. In 1978 his research on the traumas of Jewish orphans earned him a PhD. He then worked as a psychiatrist in the Netherlands well into the twenty-first century. While in hiding he started writing *The Death of the Adversary*. He buried the first 50 pages in a tin in the garden, dug them up after the war, and finished the novel.¹⁴ It was first published in 1959 and translated into English in 1962.¹⁵

13 Hans Keilson, *The Death of the Adversary*, trans. Ivo Jarosy (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

14 Keilson related this in an interview with Jannetje Koelewijn in *NRC Handelsblad*, 24 December 2010. Some reviews wrongly state that he wrote the entire novel while in hiding.

15 Hans Keilson, *Der Tod des Widersachers* (Braunschweig: Westerman Verlag 1959). Translated by Oswald Wolff and published by Orion Press in New York, 1962.

At the time, "Time" listed *The Death of the Adversary* in the year's top ten books. Other authors on that list included Roth, Nabokov and Faulkner, but Keilson soon fell into oblivion. That changed in 2010, when his novel on hiding experiences, *Comedy in a Minor Key*, first published in 1947, was translated into English and *The Death of the Adversary* was newly translated by Ivo Jarosy. Francine Prose wrote a glowing review of both these novels in the Sunday Book Review of the "New York Times," August 8, 2010, qualifying them as masterpieces, and pronouncing Keilson a genius. So, as for its reception *The Death of the Adversary* could certainly be considered a twenty-first century novel.

The novel does not probe the nature of evil, as many perpetrator stories do, but the nature of hatred. It is set in the 1920–1930s in Germany, but neither Hitler, nor Nazism is mentioned by name; nor are the Jews mentioned as a targeted group. Hitler, the adversary from the title, is referred to as B.; the Jews are just "we" and "us." The frame story offers an explanation: a Dutch lawyer received the manuscript for safekeeping during the war, and the person who gave it, apparently the I-narrator of the main story, avoided being explicit in order not to endanger this lawyer. The effect, however (and the real reason probably), is that the text contains a general truth that exceeds the historical events. The I-narrator, a schoolboy at the beginning of the story, loses his best friend when that boy falls under the spell of B. and his followers. That makes him wonder about B.'s appeal to other people and secondly what the cause of B.'s hatred for "us" is. Those joint questions result in a strong fascination that dominates his life and thoughts. The narration shows the painful first phase of the rise of Nazism, and the boy's efforts to comprehend the events.

He catches himself thinking in a similar way as "they" in a conversation with the friend who became a follower of B. This boy relates how he became spell-bound by B. and would give his life for him.

The life of a hare-lip, I thought. At the same moment I felt a pain. It was somewhere in my body, though I could not say just where. I felt ashamed of my malice. Suddenly he was somehow different. "And why would you give your life for him?" I asked in the same sneering tone that at that same time I detested so much.¹⁶

Ostracized by his non-Jewish schoolmates, he seeks out the company of fellow Jews. One of them accuses him of defending B., because he always tries to think like him in an effort to understand his motives. Deep down he is convinced that B. will come to his senses and acknowledge that he and the

¹⁶ Keilson, *Death of the Adversary*, 58–59.

narrator are one of a kind. His friends doubt him and he in turn is critical about their pride in being Jewish:

“So you would rather thank God for being what you are,¹⁷ and attack the other just because he is the other,” I said. “You forget that the other one does the same with you, since you are the other for him [...]”¹⁸

The narrator’s friend, who becomes a follower of B., tells him that an enemy teaches you more about yourself than friends can, for the enemy’s involvement with you reveals that you are in the end related to one another. That idea settles firmly in his mind.

B., the adversary, does not figure only in the thoughts and musings of the narrator. There are two live confrontations, albeit rather one-sided. In the first, the narrator stays in a town, where B. will give a speech to bolster his campaign. The narrator sits in an adjacent lounge, hearing the speech over the loudspeakers. One aspect of B.’s rhetoric is remarkably relevant: the speaker introduces an imaginary debate partner and counters that person’s questions and objections more than adequately, thus killing his opponent off, metaphorically speaking. This passage is even more striking in view of the word “adversary,” which echoes the title of the novel:

Again he gave the appearance of carrying on an argument with the aforementioned nobody. He raised him to the rank of adversary and began a duel with him before the eyes of everyone in the hall. [...] And then he invented everything the adversary – his own creation – was saying. [...] The other one [the imaginary opponent – author’s note] had no one any more to speak for him. He, who had never existed, had been killed by the voice, and since he was silent, everyone assumed that he was dead. Helplessly I sat in the lounge. I was the nobody in the hall, I was listening to my own extermination.¹⁹

More and more the narrator seems to be deluded into thinking that B. is obsessed by him too, and that he will be able to cure B. and avert their joint disaster. In the second confrontation, years later, B. is at the height of his power. The

17 This expression may refer to a traditional Jewish morning prayer, where God is blessed, for not having made me a woman (nor a gentile, nor a slave). Or perhaps to Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, with which he addressed “some who were confident of their own righteousness”; the Pharisee thanks God that he is not like other people (Luke 18: 9–14).

18 *Ibid.*, 74.

19 *Ibid.*, 97–98.

narrator is amidst an elated crowd, who cheer B. Yet, contrary to the crowd, the narrator observes the heavily armed soldiers who are there to protect B. This shatters his childish fantasies about being B.'s friend. He now sees B. for the adversary that he is, and he begins to fantasize about shooting B. there, but at the supreme moment, he does not act, he just realizes: "No, I killed him in myself."²⁰

B. has no direct speech in this novel, and everything that the reader learns about him is through the I-narrator, whose trustworthiness is dubious. Thus, the novel essentially offers a portrait of a persecuted young man and his thoughts and delusions more than a portrait of Hitler. The provocative idea that the two are connected through a degree of similarity and interdependence does not increase Hitler's humanity, on the contrary. Because of his mesmerizing effect on his followers, and because he remains a mostly abstract and vague figure, only indirectly perceived, his mythological dimension stands out. In this case mythologizing is not equal to demonizing, though.

Harry Mulisch, *Siegfried*²¹

Harry Mulisch (1927–2010) is one of the best-known Dutch authors. Some of his novels, like *The Assault* and *The Discovery of Heaven* are translated in several languages and made into films. His account of the Eichmann trial, published before Hannah Arendt's report and with a similar point, is available in English: *Criminal Case 40/61*. Mulisch repeatedly stated that in a way he was the Second World War, born from a Jewish-Austrian mother and an Austrian military father, who divorced his wife in 1936 and collaborated during the war as an employee of the Lippmann-Rosenthal Bank, that was instrumental in the robbery of the money and possessions from the Dutch Jews. That position enabled him, however, to save his Jewish ex-wife from deportation. The war and more generally the blurred distinction between good and evil are prominent themes in Mulisch's work, of which *Siegfried*, was the last to be published during his life.

The story goes as follows. Famous Dutch writer Rudi Herter, a barely concealed self-portrait of Mulisch, visits Vienna to receive a literary prize. In a TV interview he declares that he wants to write about a completely incomprehensible figure, an enigma, like Hitler, and that he thinks that imagination is

²⁰ Ibid., 197.

²¹ Harry Mulisch, *Siegfried. Een zwarte idylle* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2001). Translated by Paul Vincent as *Siegfried* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003). The quotes in this article are my own translation.

the best instrument for understanding: "Perhaps fiction is the net that can capture him." After a lecture in which he mentions his new book about Hitler, he meets the older couple Falk, who state that they have interesting information about Hitler.²² Later they tell him that they were servants in Hitler's "court" in the Berghof. In 1938 Eva Braun became pregnant with Hitler, but this had to remain a secret, because he wanted to maintain the illusion that he was available to every German woman. The child, Siegfried, had to pass for a child of the Falks, who became very attached to the boy. In 1944, when Hitler was already in Berlin, they received an order to kill the child and make it look like an accident. If Falk would not do it, he and his wife would be sent to a concentration camp. To save his wife's life, Falk carried out the assignment. A week later they were transferred to The Hague. They never knew why Hitler ordered the murder.

Herter is shocked: Hitler was even more evil and more ruthless than he had imagined. Back in his hotel, with his assistant and mistress Maria, he loses himself in wild philosophical musings featuring Nietzsche, Wagner, and Heidegger. He feverishly dictates his thoughts about a new theory into a Dictaphone: Hitler was not so much absolute evil as absolute nothingness. He was like a black hole that sucked in all humanity around him until nothing was left. Thus, he views Hitler not so much in a psychological as in a metaphysical way. Herter does not heed Maria's critical remarks – remarks that may be interpreted as the implied reader's response.

Then follow, without any introduction, the alleged diary fragments of Eva Braun, possibly sprung from Herter's own mind – in the sleep that suddenly overwhelms him in the middle of his philosophical considerations. This diary shows the reason for Siegfried's death sentence: Himmler wanted to succeed Hitler over time and obviously Siegfried would stand in his way. He made the Gestapo fabricate papers to suggest that Eva had a Jewish grandmother. It would be inconceivable that the Führer had a child with Jewish blood, and thus Hitler ruled he had to die, because sooner or later it would become public that Siegfried was his child and not the Falks'. In the end, Eva is able to prove that her grandmother was 100% Aryan, and she is restored to her position, but that is weeks after Siegfried is killed. The marriage on the last day of their life was Hitler's gesture towards Eva to make up for the murder of her child. The death of the dogs, including Blondi's pups, in all their innocence, provides a mirror image of the murder of Siegfried. Eva, however, seems to understand the latter better than the first.

22 It probably is no coincidence that the name of the housekeeper who mainly raised Harry Mulisch, was Frieda Falk.

Maria returns to the hotel room and finds the writer lying dead on his bed. She listens to the recording of his notes, and it turns out that just before he died, Herter saw a kind of vision or appearance, of Hitler no doubt, exclaiming "He... he... he is here..."²³ Then nothing more."

For Herter, as for Mulisch himself, Hitler was the negative of the *mysterium tremendum ac fascinans*, the mystery that makes one tremble but fascinates at the same time, a characteristic that is generally attributed to God. Though the fictional diary of Eva Braun seems to offer a human image of Hitler, the novel as a whole stresses his not being human. The writer Herter wanted to see if fiction could be a mirror in which Hitler's image would become visible, but the end suggests that even fiction is unable to capture, let alone conquer, the absolute negative, the black hole of nothingness that Hitler is.

In this short novel Hitler has no voice. He is not even directly observed, he is present only in the thoughts of the writer Herter, in the story Falk tells him and in the imaginary diary of Eva Braun. That indirect approach connects Mulisch's novel with both Hans Keilson's and the next book to be discussed, A. N. Wilson's *Winnie and Wolf*. With the latter it shares the trope of Hitler's imagined child.

A. N. Wilson, *Winnie and Wolf*²⁴

British author A.N. Wilson, born in 1950, is known for his biographies of writers like Sir Walter Scott, Betjeman, Tolstoy, John Milton and C. S. Lewis and the biblical figures St. Paul and Jesus. After *Winnie and Wolf* (2007), which was on the long list for the Man Booker Prize, he published *Hitler: A Short Biography* in 2011, and many other historical books and novels.

The novel covers Hitler's rise to power from 1923 till the end of the Second World War. The preface by a Lutheran pastor offers the frame story of an elderly lady in a seniors' home in Seattle who gave the novel's text to her pastor. Occasional footnotes by the pastor explain the factual background and once even express doubt about the veracity of some of the content. Gradually it becomes clear that the alleged author of the text is this lady's foster father, who used to be the personal assistant of Siegfried Wagner, the composer's son. He remains anonymous, and is only referred to with the initial N. He was part of the Wagner household and very much taken by Siegfried's English-born wife Winifred or Winnie. She is a warm and robust personality, who ably and vigorously manages the Bayreuth Festival in the 1930s, after Siegfried Wagner's

²³ Mulisch, *Siegfried* (Dutch edition), 213.

²⁴ A. N. Wilson, *Winnie and Wolf* (London: Random House, 2007).

death. The story focuses on the relationship between Winnie Wagner and Hitler, a friend of the family, whom she and her children affectionately call (Uncle) Wolf. After the suicide of Geli Raubal, Hitler's niece, with whom he allegedly had a kinky sexual relationship,²⁵ Winnie and Hitler have an affair, from which a daughter is born. She is named Senta, after the heroine of Wagner's opera *Der Fliegende Holländer*, and is placed in an orphanage near Bayreuth. When N. marries Helga, a musician from the Bayreuth orchestra, Winnie coaxes them into adopting the child. As the Allies progress into Germany, Bayreuth is heavily bombed, and the little family escapes to Leipzig, in what was to become East-Germany. In the 1960s Senta, a professional cellist, flees to the United States following a performance of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and her foster father never sees her again. In writing this very elaborate letter, he tells her about her real lineage.

In this novel Hitler is presented in three different appearances. At his first meeting with N., he is a timid young man whose awkward behavior is a remnant of his destitute past. The amiable family man Wolf, who loves to tell stories to the four Wagner children, is the man Winnie sees foremost, disregarding the other sides of his personality, and N, instead of blackening the image of his competitor in love, takes over her view to a great extent:

[...] I belonged to that very small band of people who had seen Wolf – rather than H – had seen a genial opera lover; the apple-cheeked yeoman-soldier in a dark blue serge suit of my first meetings with him, a man who with Winnie and the children was all geniality and who, in spite of a discernible vein of overenthusiasm, and an occasional coarseness of expression, was, or appeared to be, an essentially benign figure.²⁶

Finally, there is Hitler the powerful politician and demagogue, ruthless and cruel, mostly referred to as H. The interpretation of Hitler as a split personality is made most explicit in the report of the Night of the Long Knives: “‘Spare Röhm,’ said H suddenly in the middle of the morning. Rather, it was Wolf, awkwardly aware of what H was up to.”²⁷ For Winnie, and so for N., the other Hitler, Wolf, remains dominant:

25 See for an overview of various theories about Geli Raubal's death Ron Rosenbaum, Hitler's Doomed Angel, *Vanity Fair* April 1992, accessed April 24, 2023, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/1992/04/hitlers-doomed-angel>.

26 Wilson, *Winnie and Wolf*, 266.

27 *Ibid.*, 275.

Wolf was the same person as H, but he kept H very well hidden from us. One of the reasons, I suspect, that Winnie was able to continue Wolf, and admiring him even when the extent of H's atrocities had become obvious to everyone else in Germany, was that Wolf so much needed a place in the world, where he *could* be gentle, normal, playful. It was a side of his nature that in other phases of existence he had only ever shown to dogs.²⁸

In other scenes Hitler the awkward young man and Hitler the demagogue merge. For instance, the speech Hitler gives from an upper window to a cheering crowd in an early phase of his rise to power. It is a hilarious scene because those inside the room witness how Hitler's uncontrollable flatulence punctuates each patriotic exclamation. The fragment about the poverty and frustration of Hitler's Vienna years, is another example of the merging of the awkward young man and the demagogue, more serious in tone and implication. The kindness he received from Jewish gallery owners who bought and sold some of his architectural drawings is presented as the root of his anti-Semitism: it would be against H's character, "to love those who had been such close witnesses of his life of abject humiliation."²⁹

The psychological portrait of Hitler in this novel is – deliberately – incomplete and inadequate; after all, the narrator himself acknowledges: "Although I saw more of him, close up and face to face, than many human beings did, the psychology of Wolf [...] was no more easily understood by me than by anyone else."³⁰ But Wilson does offer insight into the psychology of his followers. Granted, N has partly internalized Winnie's overly positive view, but he writes in retrospect, aware of the horrors committed in the Holocaust. In the description of his state of mind at the time, the craving for a strong man stands out, someone who can restore order in the country. During the economic misery after the First World War and later during the Great Depression famine and lawlessness seemed to take over the country, with wandering groups of ex-militaries and the constant fear of a Communist revolution. Indignation about the terms of the Versailles Treaty, especially with regard to the Rhineland, fear of a collapse of society, and nostalgic and patriotic, almost occult feelings about the fatherland, Hitler successfully took advantage of it all. Clearly, as an analysis of the social-economic situation of Germany in the Interbellum this picture is not new. But it provides an evocative background to an account of Hitler's rise to power. It is pictured as his development into a mythological national hero, the

28 *Ibid.*, 255–256.

29 *Ibid.*, 76.

30 *Ibid.*, 157.

messianic figure the Wagners saw in him, more than the progress of a power-hungry politician with unsavory friends and a tendency to violence. The war remains largely out of focus, as Hitler did not stay at the Wagners' residence, Wahnfried, in those years. Winnie is spared getting acquainted with the man who sent millions to their deaths, and with "the raving man in the bunker," out of control and no longer in touch with reality.³¹

Anti-Semitism festered in the Wagner family, starting with Richard Wagner's 1850 article "Das Judentum in der Musik," and reinforced by Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who was married to Wagner's youngest daughter Eva. Winnie, however, looked down upon the vulgar anti-Semitism of the Nazis and successfully intervened with Hitler himself when Jewish members of the Bayreuth orchestra were interned in prisons or camps. Though the narrator states that anti-Semitism never was rife in Germany, he shows how easily he went along with it, for instance when he admired Winnie for using her Swiss bank account to finance the festival (thus evading German currency that lost its value fast because of the huge inflation), but loathed his Jewish dentist with a foreign bank account, which he views as "*underhand*, sneaky, conspiratorial, typical of *them*."³² Yet, he could have known better, as he himself admits, because his parents and brother were deeply critical about the regime. One day he spotted them in a human chain defending the local synagogue against a brown shirts' attack. He realizes he should have joined them, but he had turned away. In the end his brother, active in the resistance, was hanged and his father perished in a concentration camp. The narrator N presents himself as the typical bystander, who does not take a stand, because he has nothing to gain from that.

The novel's composition mirrors Hitler's infatuation with Wagner and his work, and his penchant for Germanic mythology: the seven sections of the book are titled after Wagner operas, each having a theme in common with its title opera. It is a double bind, because in each section the performance of the opera in question, with its organizational and artistic complications, is part of the story. But for our topic the more important aspect of this Wagner line of the novel is the way Hitler is mesmerized by the Wagnerian world, and in turn mesmerizes his entourage and almost all of Germany with his megalomaniac plans.

This Wagner line deviates from the autodiegetic narration. Describing Richard Wagner and his mid nineteenth century adventures, the I-narrator

31 It is doubtful if that would have changed her opinion of him, as a 1975 TV interview with Hans Jürgen Syberman has shown.

32 *Ibid.*, 128.

seems to shift to an extradiegetic, omniscient point of view, with knowledge of Wagner's mind: "God, that concert season in London (1855, BS) was hell!"³³ A similar stylistic rupture occurs on pages 244-254, when details from Hitler's past are related that N can hardly have known. The latter instance does give some insight in Hitler's character and development but cannot be explained away by N's over-identification with Hitler. Over-identification with Wagner could be a possibility in the Wagner episode, but it is far-fetched and not completely credible. These inconsistencies do detract somewhat from the novel's representation of Hitler's followers: not Nazis, or at least not die-hard ones, but turning a blind eye to the dark side of Hitler and the Nazi party.³⁴

Timur Vermes, *Look Who's Back*³⁵

Timur Vermes' *Er ist wieder da* from 2012 is the most widely discussed novel of the five considered in this chapter. Apart from Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* from 2006, no fiction on Holocaust perpetrators has received so much critical and scholarly attention as Vermes' novel. Since this is the only one of the five here discussed that meets the condition of an autodiegetic narrator that was McGlothlin's point of departure, I will try to identify the aspects of readers' possible identificatory response that she designated.

Hitler, the autodiegetic narrator, finds himself in contemporary Berlin, miraculously risen from the dead. His confrontation with present day Germany is at first hilarious. He misinterprets a granola bar as evidence of a still persistent food shortage, and the presence of many Turkish people in the streets tells him that the Turkish army has successfully defended Berlin against the Soviets. Many passages can be read as satirical commentary on contemporary German (and European) society, such as his first introduction to a television set. He immediately sees its possibilities for propaganda but is appalled that there are only insipid cooking programs to watch or banal talk shows about family problems. Aided by the humorous phrasing, these views may foster a partial perspectival identification, making readers look from an outsider's perspective to what they are used to as normal. Likewise, Hitler observes that Germany has apparently forged its own currency for the rest of Europe, that

33 Ibid., 260.

34 Apart from the child that Winifred allegedly had with Hitler, most of the facts in the novel are corroborated by Brigitte Hamann's biography of Winifred: *Winifred Wagner: A Life at the Heart of Hitler's Bayreuth*. Translated by Alan Bance (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt, 2005).

35 Timur Vermes, *Look Who's Back*, trans. Jamie Bulloch (London: Quercus, 2014). Originally in German, *Er ist wieder da* (Köln: Eichborn Verlag, 2012).

the journal *Bild* must be geared for the elderly because of the chocolate letters of the headlines, and that the Olympics in Beijing successfully imitated Berlin's by presenting the hosting country as eminently innocent.

Less amusing are some of his tirades against "das internationale Finanzjudentum" or "the by syphilis degenerated brains of the hate press," and his phantasies about the next war, in which he – contrary to the one in the 1940s – would first sacrifice the unworthy people to the war effort, and save the elite. Here, no ideological identification is aimed at and none is accomplished.

In the novel, the general public sees Hitler as funny and harmless, taking him for an accomplished method actor or comedian. They go along in his "play" and offer him appearances in television shows, with all the misunderstandings that go with it. Hitler mistakes their smiles for approval. He wants to conduct street interviews as a means to whip up general discontent and is amazed that people appear mostly satisfied with their lives and Germany's politics. Gradually he begins to see that no one understands who he really is. He muses: "The advantage of being over 120 years of age, is mostly a tactical one: the political opponent does not count on it and is taken completely by surprise."³⁶ He himself does not understand, any more than the reader, how it is possible that he came back to life again.

This issue is a bump in understanding the novel as a political or societal satire. Can we reproach the German public in the novel for laughing at this Hitler and for playing along with him, stretching an arm, shouting *Sieg Heil* and addressing him as *Mein Führer*? Is it a sign of naivety, or even ideological identification in these fictitious Germans – or in readers who smile at the revived Hitler's adventures? Does the novel offer severe criticism or an endorsement of contemporary Germany? After all, no sane person could ever think this is the "real" Hitler. In that sense the novel could well be a satire of the moralistic culture of *Betroffenheit*, that Gavriel Rosenfeld pointed out for West-Germany from the 1970s.³⁷ Yet this Hitler's ideas do find fertile soil, and there is wide public acclaim for him as a political commentator who speaks his mind. Thus, the story offers satirical criticism of the naivety of the popular response to this alleged stand-up comedian, who so keenly exposes the flaws in German society. It also shows the power of the modern media and deft rhetoric and their danger when used for the wrong causes. The Holocaust is not more than a dark shadow in the background, but tellingly it is the young woman assigned to him as his secretary, who stands up against him after her visit to her Jewish

³⁶ Vermes, *Look*, 282.

³⁷ Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler!*, 16.

grandmother. But she is practically alone in acknowledging the danger this “comedian’s” media success poses.

If we consider the diegetic narrator Hitler using McGlothlin’s taxonomy, we may find some perspectival identification with his criticism of certain aspects of the consumerist modern culture. Reliability-dependent identification plays no role, since the humor of the novel is exactly based on the reader knowing more and better than the I-narrator. There could be a small measure of affective identification in as far as readers can feel sympathy with mavericks and outsiders in general, people who do not fit in modern society or do not have a tight grasp of reality. Ideological identification is not to be expected – or hoped for – with a narrator who is openly anti-Semitic, racist, and ruthless where other people’s interests or even their lives are at stake.³⁸ The positive response from the fictitious public regards only some, evidently popular, parts of his views, disconcerting as that response in itself is. That leaves the most basic type of identification, the existentialist one, and there is no real question of that either: his miraculous and unexplained resurrection prevents readers’ identification with the narrator as a fellow human.

Vermes both demonizes and humanizes Hitler. His supernatural existence, his total lack of repentance or insight in the causes of Germany’s defeat, and his determination to start a new world war contribute to the demonic dimension. His presentation as an old man at a loss in present day culture and society may be viewed as humanizing. The misperceptions and clashes with reality constitute an important part of the humor in this novel. Its humor makes the novel a prime example of the trend of normalization of the Nazi past that Gavriel Rosenfeld pointed out.³⁹ However, what was humorous in the Germany of 2012, may be less so in the present day, after the refugee crisis and the sharp rise of the populist party “Alternatives for Germany” with its nationalist, conservative and xenophobic agenda, violent extreme right movements, and the Reichsbürgers’ plans to overthrow the government, as revealed in 2022. We can only hope that in the near future we can still look upon this novel as a – perhaps not completely successful – attempt at a humorous expression of the trend of normalization of the Nazi era, and not as prophecy of real political developments.

38 In this respect the scene where Hitler shoots a bothersome dog is rather out of character with the historical Hitler.

39 British critics have indicated that making fun of Hitler may be transgressive in Germany, but that it has been done in the UK for decades. In the United States making fun of Hitler happened especially before and during the war, Charlie Chaplin’s film *The Great Dictator* is the best-known example of that trend.

Lavie Tidhar, *A Man Lies Dreaming*⁴⁰

Lavie Tidhar is an Israeli born author (1976), who now lives in the United Kingdom and writes in English, mostly sci-fi and phantasy. His grandparents were Holocaust survivors, his mother born in a DP camp. This, in a sense transgressive, novel was nominated for several prizes, and mostly – but not unanimously – favorably reviewed (“The Guardian”: “a twisted masterpiece”⁴¹).

It is an alternate history but unlike most others of the genre: here it is not the victory of Nazism in the world (or the US, like in Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*, or in Great-Britain, like in Len Deighton’s *SS-GB*), but the defeat of the national-socialist party in the 1933 elections. The communists won and installed an equally harsh terror regime, without targeting the Jews. In England, however, Fascist politician Oswald Mosley is about to become prime-minister and anti-Semitism has become mainstream. Hitler, now going by the name Wolf, has managed to escape from Germany and leads an anonymous life in poverty as an unsuccessful private detective in London. The city is awash with refugees from Germany and Austria, both Nazis and bankers and industrialists, among them – with a wink to history – Hess, Göring, Ilse Koch, Eichmann, Leni Riefensthal. The last 15 pages of the novel are reserved for notes that explain the historical background of these and other characters and events. Hitler’s adventures are like a low-brow pulp detective story, with an excessive amount of violence and – mostly Sadomasochistic – sex. Wolf is frequently beaten up, by a Jewish police inspector, by a Jewish banker, Rubinstein, whose beautiful daughter had employed him to find her lost sister, by the thugs of his former Nazi associates, whose network of human trafficking he investigates. The banker even lets his ruffians forcefully circumcise him.

The story is told half in the third person, half in Wolf’s first-person diary fragments, both in the past tense. These fragments uncover something of his past, the love for his mother, abuse by his father, and his – unhealthy – love for his young niece Geli Raubal. The latter is a link to Wilson’s novel, as is the name Wolf with which Hitler calls himself. The difference between the narrated text and the diary fragments is slight and, in my opinion, not very functional.

Wolf is sketched as a doggedly raving anti-Semite, who does not curb his tongue, losing all caution and smartness, for instance when he shouts his

40 Lavie Tidhar, *A Man Lies Dreaming* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014).

41 Adam Roberts, “A Man Lies Dreaming by Lavie Tidhar Review – A Noir Novel about the Holocaust” *The Guardian*, October 15, 2014, accessed April 28, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/15/a-man-lies-dreaming-lavie-tidhar-review-novel>.

prejudiced insults at Rubinstein when he is completely at the banker's mercy. His arrogance and self-aggrandizement are utterly unlikely. Other unsympathetic features are his obsession with prostitutes, his idea that love is only a sign of weakness and his taste for women as just adoring and obedient, the same way as he likes his dog Blonda.

This crude story is interspersed with fragments starting with, 'In another time and place Shomer lies dreaming' (or: rises blinking, and likewise phrases). They are, in the present tense, about a prisoner in Auschwitz called Shomer. Experts may recognize this name: Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem once wrote a diatribe against a pulp fiction writer, Shomer, in the late nineteenth century. These fragments offer a credible and moving picture of life in the camp, but they comprise no more than about ten percent of the text. Though it is not said in so many words, the suggestion clearly is that the Wolf story is a kind of revenge phantasy by Shomer, his imagination a way to escape the ordeal of Auschwitz. The novel's title points in the direction of this interpretation. The remarkably violent role of some of the Jewish characters may be a counter move against the prejudice of Jews as weak and defenseless. I felt some discomfort with the many unpleasant Jewish characters, though the non-Jewish ones are equally unlikeable.

The Wolf and Shomer plotlines fleetingly touch each other at the end, when Wolf dreams he is in a concentration camp, much like Shomer's experience, and when Shomer dreams of arriving on the shore of the promised land, seeing a ship with refugees approaching, the same ship that carries Wolf, as a Jewish refugee, to Palestine.

The Case Studies Compared to Each Other and to Literary Theory

How do these five novels correspond to the paradigms established by Rosenfeld, Pettitt, Butter, Bragança, and McGlothlin? The device of narratological distancing that Joanne Pettitt pointed out (though the instances that she refers to provide distance in a more literal, visual sense),⁴² is operating in four of the five novels, namely those that employ some kind of frame story: *The Death of the Adversary*, *Siegfried*, *Winnie and Wolf*, and *A man lies dreaming*. Keilson and Wilson present their novel as the text of a manuscript by an anonymous author, found by an uninvolved third party. Mulisch incorporates the part in which Hitler is active as the story the protagonist hears from former servants, and in the alleged diary of Eva Braun, without clarification if this is imagined or dreamt by the protagonist, or in some unexplained way 'really' has come in his possession. Tidhar leaves it to the perceptive reader to understand the

⁴² Pettitt, *Perpetrators*, 101.

Hitler (or Wolf) part as the revenge fantasy of a concentration camp prisoner. So, four of the five novels use a literary device of distancing. The fifth novel's setting, *Look Who's Back*, could be said to be so implausible that that in itself provides distance.

Gavriel Rosenfeld identified humor as a means of normalization of the Nazi past, in films and cartoons, and in the more recent genre of memes. Vermes is the only one of the five novelists discussed here who deploys humor. However, his humor is the result of exactly the opposite of a normalizing trend in view of the physically impossible point of departure: Hitler inexplicably risen from the dead. Vermes induces smiles through Hitler's not understanding the modern world, and the fictitious public's unawareness of who he really is. One could consider Tidhar's novel as humorous too. That humor is the effect of the disparity of the fictitious, completely grounded Hitler and the historical figure. There is a small measure of humor in Wilson's account of Hitler too, but it is mostly restricted to the flatulence theme, and not very prominent in most of the novel. The humor lies in the contrast of such a sordid feature and the un-normal impact of the historical figure. In all three cases it is mainly the contrast between history and fiction (though I do not know if his flatulence is fictitious) that has a humorous effect. On the other hand, in all three cases it could be contested that laughing about Hitler in itself – whatever the exact reason – is a way of coping with the phenomenon, and thus a kind of normalization. Bragança pointed out that humor and trivialization gain their effect precisely because we all know that in the end Hitler was evil.⁴³

It is remarkable that the not very common trope of Hitler's offspring is present in two of the five novels. Both are composed as a story within a story, just like American author Gary Goss's novel *Hitler's Daughter* (1973).⁴⁴ Coincidentally, Wilson's and Mulisch's novels are from the same year, 2007, which is some thirty years later than American ones about Hitler's alleged children.⁴⁵ In *Siegfried* the story of the murdered son is proof of Hitler's

43 Bragança, *French Afterlives*, 10. For this he also refers to Richard Evans, *The Third Reich in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

44 See for a discussion of this not widely known novel, Gavriel Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made*, 224–227 and Michael Butter, *The Epitome of Evil*, 75–82. Goss' novel is not to be mistaken for Australian author Jackie French's children's book of the same title from 1999.

45 Michael Butter discusses four other American novels that explore this theme: Martin Dibner, *A God for Tomorrow* (1961), Gus Weill, *The Führer Seed* (1979), Timothy Benford, *Hitler's Daughter... Wants to Occupy the White House* (1983) and Ira Levin's thriller about boys who are biologically Hitler's clones, *The Boys from Brazil* (1976) (*Epitome*, 32–33 and chapter 4, "Children, Clones and Conspiracies").

ruthless character and can thus be considered a way of demonizing him. In *Winnie and Wolf* that is not the case, but his indifferent attitude towards the child does nothing to make him into a more human character either, despite his alleged love for children in general and the Wagner children in particular.

Hitler's countenance is not strongly thematized in these novels. The eyes and the voice receive most attention as instrumental for the impact he has on people, more on crowds than on individuals. Both Keilson and Wilson contend that the rest of his features are not very special and hardly warrant his public success. Tidhar is the only one who pays attention to the element in his appearance that is, apart from the lock of hair on his brow, the most characteristic: the moustache, now shaved off. These two, the moustache and the lock on his brow, have become so iconic that they figure as identifiers on the cover of every edition of *Look Who's Back*. They work more as a mocking symbol than as a demonizing feature, whereas the way the eyes and voice with their mesmerizing effect figure in the other novels does contribute to his demonic or mythological status. With Tidhar, precisely the absence of this mesmerizing effect is a recurring motif. It conveys that the circumstances defined and enabled Hitler's charisma. For Vermes, of course, the whole story hinges on Hitler's countenance that is exactly the same as in April 1945, including the uniform that smells of the gasoline with which the body was supposed to be burnt. Would the typical features be absent, the fictitious public would only show support for his right wing, nationalistic views, but now it is also – at least in part – laughter at the country's dark past, uneasy as that laughter may also be. Yet clearly, Vermes shows Hitler with his charisma unabated, exactly the opposite of what Tidhar suggests.

Manuel Bragança pointed out that using historical characters in fiction requires a difficult balance between too much and too little details.⁴⁶ Keilson and Mulisch stay on the latter side. According to Bragança this runs the risk of stereotyping, which, indeed, seems true for these novels. They both tilt towards mythologizing Hitler, and both do so intentionally. In this, Mulisch chooses the more traditional approach of Hitler as demonic; Keilson uses the mythologizing more unexpectedly, as part of the psychology of the I-narrator. In Wilson's novel historical facts, all focused on the pre-war years, serve the creditability of the story and the portrayal of Winnie Wagner and her circle. The historical facts contribute to understanding Hitler's popularity as the savior of a Germany in disarray. Therefore, this historical setting works more for the humanization of Hitler's followers and the German people than for humanization of Hitler himself.

46 Bragança, *French Afterlives*, 9.

Hitler's relationship with his much younger niece Geli Raubal figure both in Wilson's and in Tidhar's novel. She lived in Hitler's apartment in Munich and he was more than fond of her. In 1931 she was found dead there, at 23, killed by Hitler's gun. In his authoritative and exhaustively researched Hitler biography Ian Kershaw is very negative on Hitler's attitude and behavior towards her. He regards his extreme jealousy and possessiveness as pathological; even physical violence is hinted at. Yet it remains uncertain if their relationship was explicitly sexual, and neither has it ever been clarified if her death was suicide or instigated by Himmler or other leading figures in the Nazi party.⁴⁷ A love affair could have contributed to humanizing Hitler's portrait (as it does in Wilson's portrayal of Hitler's relationship with Winifred Wagner), not in this case, however: both the incestuous aspect and the domineering, negative character of the part Hitler played, work against that, with just an unsympathetic, not a downright demonizing effect. The pseudonym Wolf, that is so prominent in Wilson's and Tidhar's novels, is based on another historical fact, as Ian Kershaw relates about his stay in Bavaria in the early 1930's.⁴⁸

In Vermes's novel the historical details mostly serve a humorous purpose as they underline the difference between "now," present-day Germany and "then," in the way Hitler views the world. Lavie Tidhar, uses historical details unusually much (for a novel) and he elaborately accounts for them in the pages of notes with which he concludes. The details function partly to underline the counter factuality of the Wolf part of the story, such as the fiction that all these high-ranking, influential Nazis end up as immigrants in London. Other details, such as Oswald Mosley and the Mitford sisters, and many views that Wolf expresses, lend the story a sense of familiarity and recognizability (for historically well-informed readers, that is). The historical characters and views are woven into the counter-factual story with an effect that may be the opposite of the de-realizing one that Bragança mentions as the risk of using too many historical details. Roland Barthes indicated with this term that the fictional pact with its "suspension of disbelief" is breached by the awareness of the difference between reality and the fictional world.⁴⁹ But in the end, the suspension of disbelief is not what Tidhar aims at, assuming that the Wolf part is indeed Shomer's revenge phantasy.

47 Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936*. Hoogmoed (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1999) (trans. of *Hitler, 1889–1936*. *Hubris*. London: Allen Lane, 1998), 458.

48 Kershaw, *Hitler*. Hoogmoed, 370; 372.

49 Bragança, *French Afterlives*, 10.

As for demonizing and humanizing Hitler, Harry Mulisch is the only one to unequivocally choose the demonizing approach. Keilson does so to a lesser degree because of the distancing device of the Jewish boy as focalizer. Wilson hardly does so, mainly because the Hitler who wrought havoc in Germany, not to mention the Holocaust, stays out of focus; that part of the past looms in the unspoken background; the war years and the Holocaust are only present in the narrator's hindsight, not in the related events. Vermes is a mix, but the demonizing, reinforced perhaps by the supernatural nature of Hitler's presence in contemporary Germany, is diminished by humor. Tidhar – or rather the Shomer character – draws an utterly unlikable picture of Hitler, but he does not demonize him.

These five novels aim more at fostering reader's empathy for those people who were attracted to Hitler than for the man himself. Though all discussed novels, except *Siegfried*, grant him some amount of spoken word, Vermes is the only one who makes Hitler the autodiegetic narrator. Other instances of Hitler as focalizer are rare, and when it occurs, as, indirectly, in *A Man Lies Dreaming*, it is to some extent with a humorous effect. All use a circuitous way to approach their subject, if we consider the lack of realism in Vermes as such too.

Existential identification on the reader's part is mostly possible, with the exception of Harry Mulisch's and Vermes's novels; in the first it is not possible because Hitler stands for absolute, metaphysical evil, and in the latter because of the lack of realism that makes Hitler a supernatural entity instead of a human being. Some perspectival identification is possible in Wilson's and Vermes' novels, and perhaps a tiny bit of affective identification in Vermes' and Tidhar's books because of the predicaments Hitler is in.

Michael Butter identified no less than 115 American works of Hitler fiction published between 1939 and 2002. There is no comprehensive research of European literature to date, but it would presumably render a significantly lesser amount. Butter clearly does not agree with Gavriel Rosenfeld that the representation of Hitler as absolute evil is an expression of a moralistic perspective, and that texts that challenge that established view of Hitler testify to a waning of that perspective. He outlines a rather recent "blame-Hitler" tendency in German culture that obscures the collective responsibility, but it is debatable if Vermes' novel, which was published some years after Butter's book, fits that trend, because it could be said that the way the "revived" Hitler is received by the German public is the real topic here. Yet, the mythological or ontological tendency seems to be much weaker in Europe than in the United States. Butter contends that this interpretation of Hitler does not explain anything, that it even forecloses explanation. This may be the reason that European literature leans more towards a portrayal of Hitler that looks for psychological and especially social (and social-economic) explanations.

Though my small selection of five European works of fiction does not claim to be entirely representative, they confirm the intuition that recent European (including Israeli) fiction follows a different trend than American literature. Harry Mulisch's novel is the marked exception, but his approach is in line with some of his other work that show a preference for personal, sweeping mythology. His large novel *The Discovery of Heaven*⁵⁰ from 1992 is a point in case. Yet his 1982 novel *The Assault*,⁵¹ made into an Academy Award and Golden Globe winning film, explores the blurry boundaries of good and evil, and in that sense is more a part of the European tradition that denies an absolute dichotomy.

It is a yet open question if this difference between American and non-American Hitler fiction is due to the more recent date of the non-American novels discussed here, or to the geographical distance. The geographical proximity and the lived experience of the evil that Hitler caused may make European writers more sensitive to the contingency and the human factor in history. The urge to understand the circumstances that made Hitler's rise to power possible, and to understand the motives of the perpetrators and the bystanders may therefore be stronger than in the United States. The awareness of the extent of collaboration that followed Hitler's seize of power in Germany and the occupation in other countries,⁵² makes this need for nuance even keener. In this respect, Britain's position is complicated. Geographically – and politically now too – it is half in and half outside Europe, but, more importantly, Britain has not been occupied by the Nazis and did not face the moral dilemmas that come with a hostile takeover. As one of the Allied countries, the side of the liberators is part of Britain's collective memory. Maybe Lavie Tidhar, Israeli-born but living in London and writing in English, is an obvious candidate to write in a nuanced way about this topic, though in the case of *A Man Lies Dreaming* he chose to do so in an unusual and titillating way. His sketch of British society in the grip of Oswald Mosley and his crowd, may not be seriously meant as 'what if' history, it still offers social critique of susceptibility in society – not only British society – for fascism and populism. This view is also present in Wilson's novel, but in a less satirical way, and without any extension to Great Britain (despite Winnie Wagner's British descent).

50 Harry Mulisch, *De ontdekking van de hemel* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1992), translated by Paul Vincent as *The Discovery of Heaven* (New York: Viking, 1996).

51 Harry Mulisch, *De aanslag* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1982), translated by Claire Nicolas White as *The Assault* (London: Collins Harvill, 1985).

52 Dan Stone zooms in on this extent of collaboration without which the Holocaust would not have been possible, in his recent book, *The Holocaust: An Unfinished History* (London: Pelican, 2023).

Finally, in the comparison of the five novels, it is most remarkable that Hitler is present as a focalizer in a German and an Israeli novel, crudely said: in novels of the perpetrator and the victim countries, but in the Israeli one it should be assumed that the real focalizer is the victim Shomer. A parallel situation can be seen in the other German novel, *The Death of the Adversary*, where it is the anonymous Jewish young man whose perception of Hitler is central in the narrative, so in both Keilson's and Tidhar's novel it is the victim's perspective from which we look at the perpetrator, with in both cases a totally unreliable result. Tidhar presents a playful fantasy (though to the informed reader the Shomer part is anything but playful) and Keilson a delusion. Yet both seem to hint at an interconnectiveness between the victim and the ultimate perpetrator. The Dutch and the English novels take a bystander perspective, but the English one more leaning to the perpetrator's view and the Dutch one leaning not to the victim's side, but more to a post-fact judgmental position. It is tempting to see these stances as representative of the attitudes and literatures of the countries in which these novels are rooted, but that would stretch the conclusions for such a small body of texts much too far.

Abstract

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Fictional Representations of Hitler

American writers have taken Hitler as a fictional character more often than European writers did and their work has received more scholarly attention. Scholars like Gavriel Rosenfeld and Michael Butter roughly conclude to two opposing trends in American Hitler fiction, a humanizing and demonizing one. This article discusses recent non-American novels, focusing on five of them, two in German (Hans Keilson and Timur Vermes), one in Dutch (Harry Mulisch), one from Great-Britain (A. N. Wilson) and one from Israel (Lavie Tidhar). These five novels show striking similarities in their preference for a frame story and for elements of counterfactual history. More importantly, only one, the Dutch novella, fits the demonizing trend that is so prominent in American Hitler fiction. Contrary to what historian Gavriel Rosenfeld claims, however, the over-all humanizing approach does not have a trivializing effect. By picturing Hitler as a human being and not as a demon, either in a metaphysical or in a metaphorical sense, the distance a reader may feel to this literary character, will be bridged to some degree. His humanness could have a more alarming effect than the comfortable idea of his absolute otherness, by implicitly asking questions about the reader's empathy and the essence of being human.

Keywords

Hitler fiction, counterfactual history, mythologization, Hans Keilson, Harry Mulisch, A. N. Wilson, Timur Vermes, and Lavie Tidhar