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What is Holocaust perpetrator fiction?

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that fiction that centralizes the perpetrator perspective should be understood as a central part of the canon of Holocaust fiction. However, as I aim to show, greater distinction needs to be made between different kinds of perpetrator writing. Comparing fiction about generic Nazis with stories that centralize the figure of Adolf Hitler, I attempt to outline some of the key similarities and differences. Ultimately, perpetrator fiction works by drawing connections with the reader: the implication is that readers also have the capacity for wrongdoing and could, under the necessary conditions, act in atrocious ways. This has implications for reader responses, especially those concerning empathy and judgement. On the other hand, Hitler fiction relies on the 'otherness' of the Nazi leader, whose character resists easy normalization. This raises important questions about Hitler's place in the Western cultural imagination.

In his introduction to *Literature of the Holocaust*, Harold Bloom confesses that he 'does not know exactly what Holocaust literature is' (2004: 1). In the editor's note, he clarifies his position, acknowledging 'what seems like the impossibility of reading Holocaust literature from a merely aesthetic perspective' (2004: vii). For Alvin H. Rosenfeld – who opens his chapter 'The problematics of Holocaust literature' by asking: 'Is there such a thing as Holocaust literature?' (2004 [1980]: 21) – the question is not just a matter of content but also of how one is to read and approach literature of this kind. For Rosenfeld, Holocaust literature is indicative of a wider shift in cultural consciousness: '[it] is a striving to express a new order of consciousness, a recognizable shift in being' (2004 : 21–2). From this, we might understand Holocaust literature as both a large and loosely connected body of works that takes the Nazi genocide as its central theme and a mark of the rupture that was left behind in its wake.

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But Holocaust literature is difficult to define as a distinct category, at least in part because of the sheer scope of the field, which encompasses numerous generic categories including testimony, memoir, autobiography, poetry and fiction. Fiction that centralizes the perpetrator perspective is an essential part of this important and diverse set of works. It strives towards a new consciousness of being not by pointing to those who were lost or eternally tainted by the atrocity, but by alerting readers to the essential humanity lurking behind such radical acts of malevolence (or, to follow Hannah Arendt's often-cited phrase, to the 'banality of evil'). The first examples of this kind of fiction emerged even before the end of the war.[1] Since then, there has been a steady stream of associated material, pointing to the continued – indeed, growing – interest in the figure of the perpetrator.[2]

Despite this, several critics appear to take for granted that Holocaust fiction is fiction that tells only the story of the victims. Aharon Appelfeld, for example, argues that the very project of writing is one in which the victims can be re-humanized, something that history, with its stringent focus on statistics and facts may be unable to achieve (1988: 83). In this view, the aim of Holocaust fiction should be to honour the victims by telling their stories. If this is the goal of much Holocaust fiction, it is certainly not the aim of perpetrator fiction,[3] which centralizes the perpetrator perspective often without any real attempt at depicting (or, indeed, re-humanizing) the victims. Rosenfeld is even more explicit in his dismissal of the perpetrator perspective; he comments:

> By now the point should be clear: we lack a phenomenology of reading Holocaust literature, a series of maps that would guide us on our way as we picked up and variously tried to comprehend the writings of the victims, the survivors, the survivors-who-become-victims, and the kinds-of-survivors, those who were never there but know more than the outlines of the place. Until we devise such maps, our understanding of Holocaust literature will be only partial, well below that which belongs to full knowledge. (2004: 28)

Here Rosenfeld leaves no room for literature that centralizes the perspective of the perpetrators of the atrocity. Indeed, in his later study, *Imagining Hitler* (1985), the author presents the lack of focus on the victims as a significant problem for perpetrator writing. He contends that such an omission amounts to a separation of Hitler-as-character and 'the very things for which the leader of the Third Reich is remembered today' (1985: 40). But if the main point of Holocaust literature is to grapple with the chasm left in the wake of genocide, then it must surely both engage with the immense suffering of the victims *and* reflect on the human capacity for cruelty that enabled such extreme acts of perpetration to occur in the first place.

In David G. Roskies and Naomi Diamant's handbook, *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide* (2012) the authors offer a seemingly less rigid definition: 'Holocaust literature comprises all forms of writing, both documentary and discursive, and in any language, that have shaped the public memory of the Holocaust and been shaped by it' (2012). Yet in spite of this ostensibly broad designation – which does, I think, have the potential to admit perpetrator fiction as part of the canon of Holocaust literature – the subsequent debates that the book presents are based on the assumption of the victim's point of view. Even when Arendt's famous assessment of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) is mentioned, it is in the context of Jewish (in)action

rather than as part of an acknowledgement of the significance of the perpetrator perspective (1963: 10).

In recent years, though, this bias has started to change, and several important publications have acknowledged the significance of perpetrator narratives (see Vice and Adams, 2013; McGlothlin, 2014; Pettitt, 2017). Much of this critical literature has centred around the problem of identification. Susan Suleiman summarizes the problem as follows:

> One can understand the reluctance of serious fiction writers to portray a Nazi perpetrator's inner life. The extended representation of a character's subjectivity – not only actions but feelings, perceptions, opinions, and way of being in the world – necessarily requires a degree of empathy, on the part of both author and reader; even if the character is loathsome, he or she must at least be recognized as human, hence sharing some characteristics with the rest of us. But empathy for a perpetrator of genocide – even if it coexists with revulsion and moral condemnation – puts both author and reader on uncomfortable ethical ground, and on uncomfortable aesthetic ground as well. (2009: 2)

Robert Eaglestone also acknowledges that 'the very fact of representation creates this inescapable possibility of identification' (2013: 14). Erin McGlothlin follows a similar train of thought, writing:

> Given the ways in which the Holocaust perpetrator has been constructed in postwar and contemporary culture as a paradigmatic figure of violence, questions of reader identification, affect, and empathy are of critical ethical importance when examining texts that probe the mind of the perpetrator. (2016: 254)

One of the central challenges of perpetrator fiction, then, is the potential it has to blur the line between imaginative engagement and a more problematic kind of empathy or identification, which runs the risk of displacing the victims of the atrocity and mitigating the guilt of those responsible.[4]

Another question that is often raised by critics is about the ways in which the perpetrator perspective feeds into constructions of Holocaust memory. Eaglestone writes:

> The reasons for the boom in this form of fiction are complex and many. It seems to be tied in with the developing role of the Holocaust as a cultural metaphor for other events and as a 'proxy' for different, perhaps more recent, atrocities, especially those in which the Anglophone world is more inescapably involved. (2013: 14)

From this perspective, perpetrator fiction has been the focus of increased attention because the figure of the Nazi has become a model of genocidal culpability and a critical point of reference for any act of extreme violence. This fits into a larger (and problematic) understanding of the Holocaust as *the* genocide of the twentieth century, a kind of measuring stick by which all other genocides and large-scale atrocities are compared.[5]

These questions of reader response and Holocaust memory are important, but they remain under-theorized because, so far, not enough attention has been paid to different kinds of perpetrator writing. By comparing fiction about generic Nazis with fictional accounts of Adolf Hitler, I hope to begin this task. In so doing, I hope to show that, while

these different kinds of perpetrator writing appear to engage with similar questions, they in fact deviate significantly in their approach to the subject. In the remainder of this article, my aim is to think through these complexities and provide a tentative framework for future engagements with perpetrator writing.[6]

Perpetrator fiction: a tentative definition

Perpetrator fiction is fiction that examines the social, political and psychological motivations of Holocaust perpetrators. It explores the relationship between the individual and society and it asks important questions about the possibility of justice in the aftermath of genocide. It is thus a complex category of Holocaust literature that presents the Nazi genocide as a series of questions rather than a resolved history or an unresolved trauma. This is to be distinguished from portrayals that reduce Nazis to archetypes of evil or fetishize them as caricatures of sexual fantasy. To me, such representations do not constitute perpetrator fiction because they operate through unhelpful processes of simplification. By contrast, perpetrator fiction, as I shall argue, works by asking important questions about how and why the Holocaust came to be, and it examines the social, political and psychological conditions for extreme culpability. Perpetrator fiction is thus not synonymous with representations of Holocaust perpetrators and should not be treated as such. The division I am making here is not arbitrary: it is fundamental. Without it, vague references to Nazi perpetrators in such cultural powerhouses as *Star Wars* and the *Call of Duty* gaming franchise might end up caught within the typological net of perpetrator fiction when they have no real business being there.

In my view, the main drive of perpetrator fiction is to move beyond the two-dimensional face of evil that can be seen in more casual representations of Nazism in order to lay bare the fundamental humanity of those involved in perpetrating the genocide. This process of humanization allows us to move beyond simplistic explanations of culpability (s/he did it because s/he is evil) and explore the range of social, psychological and political conditions that enabled genocide to occur. Such an approach opens broader questions about the role and responsibilities of the individual in society and, by extension, it challenges the reader to consider their own capacity for wrongdoing.

Most commonly, this is achieved through motifs of homogeneity and commonality. As I have argued elsewhere (Pettitt, 2017), this technique works towards a process of humanization, allowing connections to be drawn with the reader that have the potential to facilitate empathic responses. Connections between Holocaust perpetrators and the reader can be constructed in a variety of ways. In Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (2009 [2006]), it is Max Aue – the protagonist and Nazi perpetrator – who lays claim to this commonality, famously addressing the reader in the opening lines as 'my human brothers' (2006: 3). In Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* (1995), empathy is (problematically) created through Michael's sympathetic reading of Hanna – a former SS guard – and through her illiteracy, which points both to her vulnerability and to a wider disconnect with the world. Elsewhere, homogeneity is presented as a motif, represented through depictions of crowds, uniforms and a more general desire to fit in. This is the case, for example, in Edgar Hilsenrath's *The Nazi and the Barber* (1971) and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* (1991).[7] In all cases, the connection between the individual and society is

foregrounded, shifting the perspective from individual culpability to societal responsibility and, in some cases, determinism. This shift allows for the hows and whys of the Holocaust to be foregrounded: guilt is not taken to be inevitable or inherent to character but, rather, a consequence of a broad range of social, political and psychological factors. Claims to a common humanity (what I have called a process of humanization) enforce the notion that, should the reader have been subject to the same range of forces, he or she could also have become a perpetrator of the Holocaust.

However, this supposition is never left to lie by authors of perpetrator fiction: instead, any claims to commonality are interrupted by deviancies and other narrative disturbances that prevent empathy from happening in any straightforward way. It is for this reason that perpetrator fiction often includes scenes of rape –*The Hooligan* (Nassauer, 1960), *Night of the Aurochs* (Trumbo, 1979), *Ostland* (Thomas, 2013) – sexual deviancies –*The Nazi and the Barber* (Hilsenrath, 1971), *The Reader* (Schlink, 1995), *The Kindly Ones* (Littell, 2009) – and misappropriated religious views – *Deutsches requiem* (Borges, 1946), *Kaputt* (Malaparte, 1946), *Night of the Aurochs* (Trumbo, 1979) – all of which mark a clear distinction between the antagonists of perpetrator fiction and the reader.[8]

A recent example that is yet to receive critical attention is David Thomas's *Ostland* (2013). Based on a true story, the text plays on the thriller genre, following the story of Georg Heuser, a detective, who, in the first half of the story, successfully tracks down the seemingly uncatchable S-Bahn murderer in Berlin. Years later, he himself is arrested for murder following his actions against the Jews on the German front on the outskirts of Russia, a place the Nazis call Ostland. The switch from respected detective to wanted murderer articulates, albeit in a rather crude way, the transition of 'good German' to 'bad Nazi' and thus reflects the circumstantial aspects of Nazi criminality. Heuser is not necessarily inherently bad: he acted within the parameters of acceptable behaviour in his given situation (as deplorable as that behaviour might be to the reader). The link between this contextual view of culpability and the reader is brought to the fore by the author who, in a video introduction to the work, describes the novel as a 'why-dunnit':

> how can somebody, who is not a psychopath, he was never a member of the Nazi Party, he never showed any anti-Semitic opinions, and yet he did this terrible thing. Why would he do that? And, if he could do that, what's to stop any of us doing the same thing? (www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyfxHe6g2F0)

These questions of commonality and circumstance place *Ostland* squarely within the conventional bounds of perpetrator fiction, as outlined above.

The majority of the novel is narrated by Heuser himself, a technique that allows the perpetrator figure to simultaneously articulate his supposed discomfort – 'that night, all the bodies came back to haunt me in nightmares that grew ever more extreme' (2013: loc. 3591) – and offer justifications and mitigations for his actions: 'my whole life had been dedicated to following orders and doing my best' (2013: loc. 4741). Yet, rather than seeking to undermine such protestations, Thomas seems to corroborate a more circumstantial view of events when the novel switches to the third-person, focusing on the perspective of Max Kraus and Paula Siebert, the two prosecutors of Heuser's case. In the argument between the two that effectively ends the book, Max declares:

> Listen, I was as angry as you when I heard that sanctimonious crap about them not belonging to the normal class of criminal. But then I thought about it and I asked myself: how many of those men would have committed a serious crime if they'd just led normal lives, in a sane society? (2013: loc. 4887)

In the end, then, even those who are charged with (and passionate about) prosecuting Heuser and others like him appear to validate Heuser's defence, suggesting that he was but one cog in a vast machine of culpability. Such a view is not intended to get Heuser off the hook – he is ultimately found guilty of the offences and sentenced to a maximum of 15 years in prison, though it is expected that he will be released much sooner – but it does serve to complicate the rather facile notions of evil that often accompany representations of Nazis, especially in popular culture.

> Look, I'm not saying that Heuser didn't do terrible things, or excusing him, or making out that he shouldn't have been sent to prison for the rest of his godforsaken life. He should, and I'm furious that he'll be back walking the streets as a free man when all the people he killed are rotting in their graves . . . I'm just saying that anyone in the same position would have acted the same way those guys did. (2013: loc. 4923)

The judge at the trial argues for something similar:

> None of the accused committed these crimes of their own volition. Instead, they followed the orders of a government that no longer exists. Aside from the events dealt with at this trial, none had any conflicts with the law, and after the war, without exception, they regained reputable jobs and led a proper life *in honourable circumstance*. (2013: loc. 4801; emphasis added)

Yet even in a novel that seems open to examining the legitimacy of such a deterministic view of culpability, the author is unable to resist the temptation of providing the reader with an alternative basis for condemnation when he depicts Heuser raping Hannah, a Jewish woman with whom he sympathizes but who nevertheless remains under his control. It is, as Eaglestone suggests in his discussion of Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, as if a reader needs something more than the Holocaust to denounce a Holocaust perpetrator (2013: 21).

Perpetrator fiction, as I conceive of it, walks the line between commonality and difference, creating tensions that challenge traditional empathetic responses and force the reader to confront their own potential for wrongdoing. It is through these processes that questions of how and why the Holocaust came to be are centralized. This is not true of fiction about Adolf Hitler which, at least partly because of the mystique surrounding the character of the Nazi leader, tends to orient itself around a different set of questions.

Hitler fiction

Adolf Hitler has come to characterize 'evil' in the cultural psyche. However, perhaps as a consequence of this designation, fiction that focuses on depictions of the Nazi leader – what I call Hitler fiction – does not work in the same way as perpetrator fiction more generally. This is probably the reason that important studies such as Michael Butter's *The*

Epitome of Evil: Hitler in American Fiction 1939–2002 (2009), Alvin H. Rosenfeld's
Imagining Hitler (1985) and Gavriel Rosenfeld's more recent *Hi Hitler!* (2015) take
Hitler fiction as a separate, if obviously associated, category.[9] My aim here is to think
this relationship through, considering the reasons why this separation may be helpful and
appropriate. My main contention is that, unlike perpetrator fiction, which takes the ques-
tion of guilt as its central theme, culpability in Hitler fiction is taken for granted. The
consequence of this is that Hitler's guilt, so obviously tied to the genocide, is presented
as an assumption rather than a question. It is shown to be an intrinsic aspect of his char-
acter, something that is both recognized by readers and exploited by authors.

Talking about Hitler in American fiction, Butter argues that 'Hitler has become a
powerful trope that is employed to negotiate contemporaneous domestic concerns whose
actual connection to the Hitler of history is feeble, to say the least' (2009: 2). He goes on
to say:

> Despite inerasable metonymic links to Nazism, World War II, and the Holocaust, the Hitler of
> American culture is not so much a historical persona as a free-floating signifier ready to be
> filled with shifting meaning, depending on the exigencies of the historical moment. (2009: 5)

A.H. Rosenfeld also acknowledges the distinction between Hitler the historical figure
and Hitler the character:

> Hitler, one comes to understand, simultaneously haunts and defies contemporary imagination,
> which, with respect to the whole Nazi past, seems drawn between a willed forgetfulness and a
> kind of mythologized memory. As a consequence, the ghost of Hitler has been set free from the
> structures of historical consciousness and enjoys a second life through art. (1985: xx)

Approaching the problem through the lens of normalization, G. D. Rosenfeld writes:

> While Hitler and the Nazis superficially appear everywhere, in a deeper sense, they are nowhere.
> The inflated use of the Nazi legacy for tendentious purposes threatens to drain it of much of its
> historical distinctiveness and turn it into an empty signifier. This development marks a notable
> change in Western consciousness of the Third Reich. Once upon a time, Hitler and the Nazis
> were viewed as admonishing symbols of extremity. Today, their ubiquity has lent them an aura
> of normality (2015: 341).

More often than not, these processes of appropriation and normalization mean that Hitler
is used primarily as symbolic currency, either to comment on contemporary concerns, as
in Timur Vermes' *Look Who's Back* (2014), or to interrogate the ways in which the
Holocaust and its perpetrators have been remembered as a kind of ubiquitous myth.
Richard Grayson's 'With Hitler in New York' (1979), Steve Erickson's *Tours of the
Black Clock* (1989) and Norman Mailer's *The Castle in the Forest* (2007) all work in this
way. Hitler's position as the epitome of evil means that, unlike in perpetrator fiction,
which focuses on the question of how the Holocaust could have happened – how could
people like you and me do it? – Hitler's guilt is taken for granted.

In early texts, this paradigm emerges in spite of the fact that many such works centred
around the idea of putting Hitler on trial for his crimes. As Rosenfeld puts it:

> Early postwar narratives portrayed Hitler as an unrepentant demon who is brought to justice for his crimes, but more recent works have portrayed him as a relatively normal human being who succeeds in evading humanity's judgement. (2015: 23)

Earlier works attempted to provide a sense of catharsis by showing Hitler to have faced just punishment. One of the earliest examples of this kind of literature is Michael Young's *The Trial of Adolf Hitler* (1944). Written before the end of the war, the narrative is split into two halves: the first recounts the many sufferings of the Schneidermann family, who are persecuted under Nazi racial laws, culminating in the suicide of the young Miriam. The second half of the story functions as a kind of wish-fulfilment: written as a piece of fiction by the family patriarch, Jakob, the story provides a means of catharsis as Hitler is forced to face justice for his crimes. This attempt to live out the fantasy of Hitler's death is especially poignant given that the persecution of the Jews in Europe was ongoing at the time of publication. In the story, earthly justice is shown to be insufficient and it is the ghost of Miriam Schneidermann who finally delivers her vengeance: 'No repentance, no penitence, will ever be enough for your soul to find an escape' (1944: 212). The point is that, while Hitler's guilt is assumed, both by the characters in the novel and the reader, the deliverance of a just and fitting punishment is shown to be an impossibility except in and through fiction. Even after Hitler's demise, there is discontent in the courtroom:

> Hitler was dead, but they seemed to resent his dying that way. It looked so simple, so painless, so pointless to them . . . People felt a sense of frustration, because they believed that Adolf Hitler, true to his character to the last, had seemingly cheated the gallows. (1944: 213)

Although the judge ultimately declares the punishment to have been appropriate, calling it 'a fitting finish to a dishonoured life' (1944: 214), the conclusion of the novel leaves the possibility of earthly justice in doubt.

Similarly, at the end of Philippe Van Rjndt's *The Trial of Adolf Hitler* (1978), the Nazi leader is sentenced to death, though even this is shown to be insufficient: 'It is ironic that the most severe penalty one human being may pronounce upon another – death – is still not enough to expiate, even acknowledge the enormity of the crime committed' (1978: 317). Max Radin's *The Day of Reckoning* (1943) portrays a similar problem:

> And yet it somehow appeared that these monstrous crimes were on too vast a scale to come within human justice as applied to individuals, even the individuals who had caused or occasioned them. They were the crimes of Lucifer, punishable by a kind of hell which human punishment could not create or fathom. (1943: 69)

Radin's novella ends with Hitler being sentenced to death by cyanide gas – 'Whether this had taken place in a lethal chamber or otherwise was not disposed' (1943: 144) – further suggesting a drive towards an unobtainable poetic justice.

Trials of Adolf Hitler may appear, at first glance, to be a means of interrogating the guilt of the Nazi leader. On closer inspection, though, they actually work not by questioning the culpability of Hitler but by exploring the possibility of justice and catharsis

in the postwar era. Later, during the Hitler wave of the 1970s, this focus on the (im)possibility of justice began to subside. As Rosenfeld has argued, most texts produced during this period 'skimmed over the Holocaust in the process of probing the arcane depths of Hitler's biography' (2015: 131):

> This desire for understanding necessitated viewing Hitler less as a demon – that is, someone removed from the sphere of rational explanation – and more as a human being. Attention towards Hitler thus began to move beyond his political policies to the ins and outs of his private life – including his early education, friendships, romantic relationships, artistic interests, habits, hobbies, and pets. (2015: 218)

We see this in a number of texts that work by decontextualizing the Nazi leader: Grayson's 'With Hitler in New York' (1979), Beryl Bainbridge's *Young Adolf* (1978), Vermes' *Look Who's Back* (2014) and Mailer's *The Castle in the Forest* (2007) all work by placing Hitler within a new context, outside of his associations with the Third Reich. In all these examples, Hitler is somehow neutralized and the pre-eminent focus is on the question (or possibility) of his 'normality'. Yet, as Rosenfeld argues in relation to Bainbridge's novella:

> one reads *Young Adolf* with one eye of the novel, the other on history, and 'completes' the narrative, so to speak, knowing full well that the small irony at its close ('it is a pity he will never amount to anything') will be amplified many times over and in the harshest way as a consequence of events outside the novel. (1985: 34)

Indeed, as these texts show, Hitler cannot easily be placed within alternative contexts. In fact, the texts work precisely because the reader is able to recognize the shift, which creates a stark, jarring effect. Hitler's symbolic presence overrides any attempt at neutralization.

Brian Aldiss's short story 'Swastika!' (1970) follows this trend. Without explaining the logistics of how it came to be, the story takes as its starting point Hitler's miraculous survival following his supposed suicide at the end of the war. The narrator – Brian, a clear if slightly odd representation of the author – meets up with the now-aging Hitler, who has been living under the assumed name of Geoffrey Bunglevester. Only once does the narrator call Hitler by his real name, a faux pas for which he is swiftly chastised: 'Geoff to you, Brian' (1970: 182). This interaction suggests a hierarchy that demonstrates Hitler's remaining rhetorical dominance.

Although Hitler is by now an old man, he claims to act in an advisory capacity for a wide range of contemporary figures:

> I've had emissaries come to me over the years, Brian. They come humbly to me, exiled here. Soviet and American – and British too, to begin with. They've come swarming to me in secret. Yes, and the little tin-pot rulers too. Nasser, Hussein, the Rhodesian fellow, that ingrate Chou En Lai, Castro – filthy little Communist! All on their knees here! Even – yes, even general Dayan of Israel. Not a bad fellow, considering . . . They've all begged me to take charge of their war aims, clarify them, implement them. (1970: 185–6)

Hitler, it seems, is held up by contemporary revolutionaries as a model of Fascist power and military prowess. Even Brian, the story's narrator-cum-journalist, seems to place Hitler on a pedestal, going as far as to call him a 'a father-figure', both to himself and 'to thousands like me who had the luck to fight in the war' (1970: 184).

Such adoration is at odds with both the aging figure of Hitler, hiding out in Europe under an assumed identity, and with the kinds of responses that are both anticipated and expected in encounters with the Führer. The story works by playing on this rupture. At the same time, it suggests that the obsessive consumption of the Hitler motif – verging as it does on a kind of admiration for the Nazi leader, both as a model of Fascism and as a literary device – is entirely out of place. It is the reader who recognizes the inappropriateness of the response and who must therefore acknowledge the distastefulness of the ongoing obsession with the Nazi leader. Hitler's culpability is never questioned by the reader, even if it is readily ignored by the protagonist. This is true even as the reader consumes the story, hinting at his or her own complicity in the construction of the Hitler myth.

This assumption of guilt, which, as we have seen, is a central facet of all Hitler fiction, has clear implications in terms of the production of empathy. Since we as readers condemn Hitler-as-protagonist before we even start reading, and since we are never really given access to his inner thoughts,[10] empathy is never really a possibility. On the one hand, this has an ethical foundation in that denying access to the unmitigated justifications of one of the most murderous men in history prevents depictions of the genocide that distort the truth or that may be considered disrespectful to the millions of victims of Nazism. On the other hand, it also contributes (perhaps rather unhelpfully) to the mythologization of the Nazi leader: that is, to the sense in which he is othered, dehumanized and turned into a myth in the cultural imagination. Rosenfeld remarks:

> no representations of Hitler, highbrow or low, seem able adequately to present the man or satisfactorily explain him. 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. (1985: xx)

Thematically, this process of othering renders Hitler fiction different from perpetrator fiction, which works in the opposite way by showing Nazi perpetrators to be fundamentally human: subject to the same range of social, psychological and cultural forces as the reader. Both the assumption of Hitler's guilt and the rejection of his normality attest to the specificities of Hitler's place within the cultural psyche.

Conclusion

Sitting down to read a book about Adolf Hitler or one of his followers is, in some ways, a controversial act. Why, one might ask, would one take the time to engage with the justifications and mitigations of those responsible when so many millions cannot be heard? Why open ourselves up to understanding or, worse, empathy, when those responsible

committed such heinous crimes? Surely time is better spent honouring the victims or fighting the widespread resurgence of the far right and the rise of Holocaust denial. Yet these hesitations are, I think, a central part of engagements with this kind of literature. Indeed, the reading experience is shaped by the fact that the reader is already positioned to oppose the protagonist/narrator when he or she sits down to read the book. Yet the ways that this oppositional stance is managed by authors deviates significantly depending on the kind of perpetrator writing in question. In fiction about generic Nazis, texts force the reader to confront their own potential for wrongdoing; in Hitler fiction, guilt is isolated at the site of the Nazi leader and left unquestioned. This prompts important questions about the ways in which Hitler is held up as a cultural symbol that can be manipulated and consumed, often in highly problematic ways. Recognizing this basic distinction is an important step that will, I hope, allow for greater nuance in our engagements with perpetrator literature and promote a greater understanding of the conventions that underpin different kinds of writing about the Holocaust.

Notes

1 E.g. Radin's *The Day of Reckoning* (1943), A. M. Klein's *The Hitleriad* (1944) and Young's *The Trial of Adolf Hitler* (1944).
2 For a fuller account, see Pettitt (2017).
3 In this essay, I will use 'perpetrator fiction' as shorthand for 'Holocaust perpetrator fiction', although my suspicion is that some of the arguments presented here may also be relevant to discussions of culpability in other contexts.
4 For a more detailed discussion, see McGlothlin (2016).
5 For further discussion, see Jinks (2016; 2020).
6 It is interesting to note that a large amount of Holocaust perpetrator fiction is made accessible to Anglophone readers, either because relevant works are first written in English, or because they are subsequently translated. This tendency may simply reflect the continuing position of English as the *lingua franca* of the West, but it may also feed into the ongoing 'Americanization' of the Holocaust. For further discussion of the latter, see Lipstadt (1996), Landsberg (1997), Flanzbaum (1999), Novick (1999). Exceptions that are not widely available in English include Robert Merle's *La Mort est mon métier* (1952) and Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's more recent *La Part de l'autre* (2005). For a detailed discussion of Francophone writing about Hitler, see Manuel Brangança, *Hitler's French Literary Afterlives 1945–2017* (2019).
7 For a more in-depth discussion, see Pettitt (2016).
8 This is, of course, presumptuous, but I do not think it is untenable. Certainly, the examples I have listed here disrupt processes of empathy by creating difficult reading experiences, thereby creating distance between the reader and the protagonist or text.
9 For a useful discussion of Butter and Alvin Rosenfeld, see Brangança (2019).
10 The end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s saw a surge in interest in the Nazi leader. This period has become known as the 'Hitler wave'. For more information, see Rosenfeld (2005).
11. As far as I know, only Vermes' *Look Who's Back* provides a narrative that is internally focalized through Hitler himself. In the novel, the author combines internal focalization with a first-person narrative perspective. It is the combination of these two techniques that makes the story work. The first-person narration allows for many of the miscommunications to be made manifest, and it is the *voice* of Hitler that is shown to be dangerous with his ability to

command rhetoric. But, because we have insider information through the internal focalization – that is, we know Hitler is Hitler and not a method actor pretending to be Hitler – as readers we never fall into the same traps as the other characters in the book. We recognize the Nazi leader for who he is and we reject him accordingly. It is, therefore, the combination of these two narrative strategies that prevents empathy from occurring. The reader sees through the narrative that Hitler the character constructs for himself and recognizes the danger – a danger that is fully realized at the end but only in the internal world of the story.

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