



Marcel Atze. *"Unser Hitler": Der Hitler-Mythos im Spiegel der deutschsprachigen Literatur nach 1945.* Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2003. 493 S. EUR 45,00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-89244-644-6.

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Published on H-German (May, 2005)

Hitler Stories

When was Hitler not a myth? In his engagement with Ian Kershaw's *Der Hitler-Mythos* from 1980, Marcel Atze reminds us that the Hitler myth served as a propagandistic tool with which to build public consensus within Hitler's own lifetime (pp. 19, 23). An intertextual amalgam of various heroic narratives mapped onto Hitler's own biography, Hitler's mythic personae transcended his person such that his story resembled a civic religion. Certainly Hitler's suicide did little to quash his larger-than-life status. To be sure, countless historians, sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, and theologians alike have trimmed Hitler the myth down in the last fifty years to fit Hitler the historical person. Atze rightly claims at the outset of his study that, of all the scholarly attention paid to the mythical dimensions of Hitler, the field of literary studies has yet to contribute to the discussion. Atze's is thus the first project of its kind to inspect the many West and post-unification German literary works in which Hitler is personified.

Atze contends from the start that Hitler's personae must be acknowledged as one of the central sites of German collective memory after 1945. Literature, he argues, occupies a crucial role in the field of this memory work, for it has recorded the immortality of Hitler's personae as a channel through which to remember German fascism. In addition, German literature after 1945 has quite often invoked Hitler as a contested site of memory; literature exposed the instability of Nazi-induced myths of Hitler the benevolent leader, insofar as every

myth inevitably revealed a link to the Holocaust. By invoking Hitler, postwar and contemporary German literature has engaged repeatedly in critical historical reflection that simultaneously substantiated the persistence of the Hitler myth while defusing that myth's power. Atze writes: "Die Motivation, [Hitler] anzugreifen, liegt wohl vor allem darin, dass das, was je am Mythos gelockt und verführt haben mag, nicht nur erinnert wird, sondern darüber hinaus anscheinend noch immer wirkende Restbestände sowie gegend Verführbare vorhanden sind" (p. 35). With an eye on historiographical debates about the relationship between Hitler's biography and the genesis of the Holocaust, Atze claims that literary representations of Hitler have sided exclusively with intentionalist explanations that view Judeocide as the *raison d'être* of Hitler's will to power. In other words, German literature has positioned Hitler as the primary metaphor for the Holocaust.

Following an introductory chapter in which he positions himself vis-à-vis histories and theories of myth by Kershaw, Levi-Strauss, Stierle, Cassirer, and Blumenberg, Atze establishes how Hitler's *Mein Kampf* must be understood as the basis for any and all mythical constructions of his person. When understood as a bricolage of "myth particles" (or mythemes, to use Levi-Strauss's term), Hitler's heroic autobiography points toward postwar literature's principal points of contact with Hitler's personae. Chapter 2 carefully marches through the mythic biography of Hitler, showing how German lit-

erature has tapped into every major chapter in his vita including the posthumous myths of his survival. After piecing together Hitler's entire biography as it is invoked in postwar literature, chapters 3 and 4 focus on how literary texts have reproduced and destroyed the most outstanding Hitler mythemes. To this end, Atze develops a seven-part typography of Hitler mythemes (an illustration of which is provided on p. 333). The seven mythemes include: the soldier myth, the savior myth, the orator myth, the artist myth, the myth of Hitler as friend of nature and animals, the ascetic myth, and the father myth. Chapters 5 and 6 in Atze's study attend less to interventions in the Hitler myth and instead focus on literary representations of the technologies employed by National Socialism to propagate its Hitler myths. In closing, Atze restates his thesis on the interconnectedness of the Hitler myth and mass murder by considering a handful of primary texts that look directly at Hitler's involvement in the Final Solution.

In the most recent edition of the yearbook *Gegenwartsliteratur*, editor Paul Michael Luetzeler praises Atze's work as one of the best and most important monographs on contemporary literature to appear in recent memory.[1] Luetzeler rightly commends Atze for his extremely competent command of a wide range of primary and secondary sources across the disciplines (literary studies, history, and theory being the three most prominent). While he wishes Atze would have mined literary representations of Hitler in works like Leon Feuchtwanger's *Erfolg* from the exile period and considered representations of Hitler as the "greatest military commander ever," Luetzeler emphasizes those portions of his text that are in his estimation particularly strong. In his mind, Atze's analysis is particularly noteworthy when it turns to literary texts that engage Hitler's appropriation of Jesus's biography, his vegetarianism and affection for animals and nature, his asexuality, his role as ersatz father, and above all his exceptional oratory skills.

Other reviews of Atze's work have been far more critical. Like Luetzeler, Magnus Klaue of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* regrets that Atze did not inspect literary representations of Hitler by exile writers from before 1945.[2] According to Klaue, however, Atze's "failure" prevented his work from producing an entirely different, i.e., richer basis for comparison for his postwar texts. Klaue also faults Atze for forcing the some one hundred texts discussed in his book to fit one single hypothesis, an assertion that in Klaue's estimation proves incapable of addressing every text adequately. In my estimation, Klaue goes too far when he devalues Atze's text

selection as being largely "third-class," but his conviction that Atze does not analyze his sources thoroughly enough is not entirely unfounded. Klaue's insistence that Atze's chosen texts invoke Hitler as an alibi (i.e., a means of diverting attention from the central event in German history: Judeocide) is heavy-handed and unfair to both Atze's analysis and the works he discusses.

Zeno Ackermann, writing for *H-Soz-u-Kult*, echoes Klaue in this regard when he criticizes Atze for not engaging his primary sources more rigorously.[3] Ackermann wants to see more differentiated readings of Atze's chosen primary sources that would address, for example, questions of mimesis and mimicry as they play out in the representations of Hitler. Above all, Ackermann insists that Atze's project fails to ask the overriding question for any analysis of literary representations of Hitler: Why did the writer focus on Hitler in the first place? Why is Hitler a particular text's chosen point of contact with National Socialism? Like Klaue, Ackermann also feels that Atze's methodology, while impressive in its conceptualization, only skims the potential richness of his primary sources; the intensity of Atze's focus on the myth construct inadvertently underplays matters of historical context in each of the individual texts.

Far more affirmative in his overall assessment of Atze's work than Klaue and Ackermann, Oliver Jahraus is most critical with respect to the scope of Atze's inquiry.[4] Thoroughly satisfied with Atze's readings of literary representations of Hitler after 1945, Jahraus nevertheless infers that Atze would do well to consider in another volume other media (film and television) as well as Hitler myths in other national contexts. While the impressive breadth of Atze's study would, in my estimation, collapse under the weight of additional analyses of, say, American cinematic portrayals of Hitler, Jahraus raises in my mind a legitimate concern, one only touched upon inadvertently in Atze's book. If, as Atze's selection of sources suggests, the majority of Hitler texts appeared in the eighties and nineties, a point in time when cinema and television were also hard at work envisioning German history on the screen, to what degree is the literary fascination with Hitler in dialogue with efforts to conjure up Hitler's face or re-invoke his voice in other media? To be sure, Atze does take into consideration, as mentioned already, both Hitler's voice and countenance as two mythic sites that have garnered an extensive amount of attention from writers. Were one to follow through with the supplemental inquiry suggested by Jahraus, Atze's project would serve as a perfect springboard for further research into the discursive intersec-

tions and divergences between the Hitler that literature concocts and the Hitler that has materialized on screen. Furthermore, the outgoing premise of Atze's book—the extensive infiltration of the Hitler myth into the German psyche—insists on defining it solely as a (West) German phenomenon (that had little to do with the GDR). Jahraus's suggestions might nicely complicate such a premise, for has not the fascination with Hitler become a transnational matter, one that fascinates and infuriates the imagination regardless of national borders and history?

Luetzeler, Klaue, Ackermann, and Jahraus each raise in my mind several legitimate criticisms of Atze's book. However, they in no way detract from the overall value of his work. Without question an impressive study in terms of its meticulous research and construction, I believe *Unser Hitler* makes at times for a bumpy read, for the grand narrative he seeks to substantiate often overshadows the arsenal of primary sources that support it. Take chapter 2, for example, Atze's point of departure where he pieces together the literary construction of the myth of Hitler: moving from Hitler's own self-mythologization in *Mein Kampf*, he jumps from a 1984 novel by Bavarian writer Josef Einwanger to monologues published in 1993 by Robert Schneider. This is followed by prose from 1960 and 1971 by Austrian writers Bruno Brehm and Alois Brandstetter, respectively; a play by Dieter Forte from 1983; and excerpts from works by Horst Krger, Herbert Rosendorfer, Erich Maria Remarque, Marcel Beyer, Bernward Vesper, Peter Weiss, Gnter Kunert, Bernhard Setzwein, Christoph Brummes, Helmut Heissenbuettel, Otto Basil, Alexander Demandt, and Josef Haslinger. Add to this Atze's healthy dose of secondary sources, pack it all into roughly eighty pages, and the reader is left with a patchwork of (mostly) short close readings that, on the one hand, do indeed illustrate the author's thesis about the protracted inscription of Hitler's vita in German literature after 1945 (p. 51). On the other hand, the reader—and here I concur with Ackerman—is left wanting more careful analysis of each individual text, analysis that would clarify how and why it invokes Hitler in the first place. Said differently, Bernward Vesper's *Die Reise* from 1977 may very well take aim at the Hitler myth as does Marcel Beyer's *Flughunde* from 1995; nevertheless, their uses of Hitler as a point of contact to the disasters of German history are markedly different, above all due to the very history that separates them. It is this sort of distinction that Atze's text will surely provoke in many of his readers.

My own elaboration on Jahraus's comments from

above are intended not, as was Jahraus's objective, to insinuate that the success of *Unser Hitler* begs for a follow-up volume on representations of Hitler in film, for example. On the contrary, my sense is that the literary focus of Atze's book along with its reluctance to insert his primary texts into their respective historical contexts could provoke stimulating scholarly dialogue on how to open up Atze's readings to richer historical and cultural frameworks. If, as my overview of chapter 2 demonstrates, Atze aims to illustrate something larger than the individual text, namely the institution of literature's trans-historical fascination with Hitler's biography after National Socialism, then greater consideration of each text's context would complicate, at times frustrate, but surely bolster and diversify Atze's overall claim. By illuminating how and why Atze's primary texts interrogate and intervene in particular facets of the Hitler myth at particular historical junctures, one may begin to see how the reception of the Hitler myth is not as timeless as the myth itself.

As Luetzeler rightly insists, Atze's study contains a handful of compelling close readings. In my estimation, literary scholars will find these sections of his study particularly worthy of further discussion and debate. At the close of chapter 2, Atze's reading of Josef Haslinger's *Opernball* from 1995 is one such moment. Reading the protagonist of Haslinger's well-received thriller as a thinly veiled Hitler figure, Atze is presumably the first to demonstrate Haslinger's unmistakable appropriation of *Mein Kampf* as a means of explaining the rise in Austrian right-wing extremism. Atze's reading of the savior myth in Edgar Hilsenrath's *Der Nazi und der Friseur* from 1977 unveils how the text's Hitler twists the Sermon on the Mount into a basis for genocide. His engagement with Peter Weiss's *Asthetik des Widerstands* published from 1971 to 1985 and Marcel Beyer's *Flughunde* considers how the former articulates Hitler's voice with mass murder and how the latter deconstructs the myth of Hitler's aural power. Additional authors whose works Atze graces with sustained readings of ten pages or more include Bruno Brehm, Dieter Forte, Edgar Hilsenrath, Rolf Hochhuth, Guenter Grass, Herbert Rosendorfer, Peter Roos, Robert Schneider, Guenter Seuren, Klaus Stiller, Bernward Vesper, and Peter Paul Zahl.

At the outset of his study, Atze writes frankly of the initial frustrations with researching his topic: "[N]ach dem zentralen literarischen Text zum Hitler-Stoff [*Mein Kampf*], der auf Nachfrage stets genannt wird, sucht man vergebens. So erntete ich am Beginn meiner Recherche nach relevanten Primrtexten auch von Fachkollegen oft

nur ein Achselzucken" (p. 31). If prior to Atze's study little was formally written about Hitler representations in German literature, his work has done the profession an enormous service in ferreting out a cornucopia of literary sources and arranging them within a highly useful typology. Like any good piece of scholarship, it raises as many questions as it answers. Any and all shortcomings aside, Atze's study is without question a smart and fascinating read, one that will surely give literary scholars the impulse to rethink questions about the representability of Hitler as well as the uses of those historically contingent representations.

Notes

[1]. Magnus Klaue, "Unter Eva Brauns Bettdecke," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 7 May 2003, p. F34.

[2]. Paul Michael Luetzeler, review of *Unser Hitler: Der Hitler-Mythos im Spiegel der deutschsprachigen Literatur nach 1945*, Marcel Atze *Gegenwartsliteratur: Ein germanistisches Jahrbuch* 3 (2004): pp. 306-309.

[3]. Zeno Ackermann, review of *Unser Hitler: Der Hitler-Mythos im Spiegel der deutschsprachigen Literatur nach 1945*, by Marcel Atze, *H-Soz-u-Kult H-Net Reviews*, October 2003, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=234871066453977>.

[4]. Oliver Jahraus, "Hitler als Mythos und Medium der Literatur," *Medienobservationen*, 2003, http://www.medienobservationen.lmu.de/artikel/kritik/jahraus_atze.html.

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Citation: Richard Langston. Review of Atze, Marcel, "*Unser Hitler*": *Der Hitler-Mythos im Spiegel der deutschsprachigen Literatur nach 1945*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2005.

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