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Starring Hitler! Adolf Hitler as the Main Character in Twentieth-First Century French Fiction

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Abstract

Adolf Hitler has remained a prominent figure in popular culture, often portrayed as either the personification of evil or as an object of comedic ridicule. Although Hitler has never belonged solely to history books, testimonials, or documentaries, he has recently received a great deal of attention in French literary fiction. This article reviews three recent French novels by established authors: *La part de l'autre* (The Alternate Hypothesis) by Emmanuel Schmitt, *Lui* (Him) by Patrick Besson and *La jeunesse mélancolique et très désabusée d'Adolf Hitler* (Adolf Hitler's Depressed and Very Disillusioned Youth) by Michel Folco; all of which belong to the Twenty-First Century French literary trend of focusing on Second World War perpetrators instead of their victims. It analyzes their portrayals of the Führer, noting how Hitler has been re-imagined as sexually deviant, comical and repulsive. It argues that these representations aim to understand the Führer but end up simultaneously reinforcing and obscuring his monstrosity through grotesque depictions of sexual deviance. In such a way, this overindulgence of various psychological explanations, gratuitous sex and dark humor make it significantly harder to grasp the reality of Hitler, almost to the point where it becomes impossible to understand his place in both history and the modern world.

Keywords

French, Fiction, Second World War Memory, Hitler, Nazi, Holocaust, Sexuality, Grotesque, Patrick Besson, Michel Folco, Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt

Starring Hitler!

Adolf Hitler as the Main Character in Twentieth-First Century French Fiction

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Beginning before he became the chancellor of Germany in 1933 and continuing across the decades after his death in 1945, Adolf Hitler has remained a prominent figure in popular culture. His portrayals range from the personification of evil to an object of comedic ridicule. Although Hitler has never belonged solely to history books, testimonials, or documentaries, he has recently received a great deal of attention in literary fiction. Decades after Theodor Adorno opined that writing a poem after Auschwitz was “barbarisch” (26) ‘barbaric,’ a new generation of twenty-first century French authors is more at ease with re-imagining Hitler.¹

This article will review three recent French literary works by established novelists: the 2001 *La part de l'autre* (‘The Alternate Hypothesis’) by Emmanuel Schmitt, the 2001 *Lui* (‘Him’) by Patrick Besson, and the 2010 *La jeunesse mélancolique et très désabusée d’Adolf Hitler* (‘Adolf Hitler’s Depressed and Very Disillusioned Youth’) by Michel Folco.² It will analyze their portrayals of the *Führer*, noting how Hitler has been re-imagined. In each work, sexuality and humor play a role in establishing Hitler as a grotesque character, both comical and repulsive. While it has been argued that such portrayals aim at making the German dictator appear more human, this article declares the contrary; that these distorted literary archetypes reinforce Hitler’s monstrosity.

Prior to beginning an in-depth analysis of these works, it is worth taking a moment to contextualize these novels and reflect upon the larger trends in French literature in relation to Hitler as a fictional character. This current fad appears to be part of a more general obsession in French fiction with the Nazis and their collaborators, in particular the atrocities committed in their name during the Second World War. The first example of Adolf Hitler as a fictional character in a French novel occurred shortly after the war’s end. He appeared in

¹The resurgence of Hitler in contemporary literature and culture is not limited to France. Numerous scholars have recently addressed this phenomenon from an Anglophone perspective. Notable examples include, by chronological order, Michael Butter’s *The Epitome of Evil: Hitler in American Fiction, 1939-2002* (2009), Gavriel D. Rosenfeld’s *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (2005) and *Hi Hitler!: How the Nazi Past Is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (2015), Chapter 6 of Joanne Pettitt’s *Perpetrators in Holocaust Narratives: Encountering the Nazi Beast* (2017) is devoted to “Adolf Hitler in Fiction and Memory.” Also, although not dealing directly with portrayals of the *Führer*, the collection of essays *Representing Perpetrators in Holocaust Literature and Film* (2013) edited by Jenni Adams and Sue Rice, provides additional reading.

²The translations of all French and Francophone novel titles and quotations are mine. ‘The Alternate Hypothesis’ is the English title given to *La part de l'autre* on Eric Emmanuel Schmitt’s official website (<http://www.eric-emmanuel-schmitt.com/home-official-website.html>).

a secondary role in Jean Genet's *Pompes funèbres (Funeral Rites)* (1947). Genet chose not to focus on the dictator as a perpetrator but was instead more interested in the homoerotic appeal of the *Führer*, as well as the relationship between Nazi violence and sexual attraction. It wasn't until 1952 that a fictional work narrated the Holocaust from the point of view of a perpetrator; Robert Merle's *La mort est mon métier (Death Is My Trade)* is a fictionalized biography of Rudolf Hoess, the infamous commandant of Auschwitz.³ But examples such as these are few and far between, at least until recently.

The most prominent example of the current fad is the 2006 literary phenomenon and bestseller *Les bienveillantes (The Kindly Ones)* by Jonathan Littell, a novel presented as the memoirs of an aging, unrepentant SS officer who was an expert on the efficiency of Holocaust death camps. It sold 700,000 copies during its first year of publication and, more impressively, was awarded the Prix Goncourt, the most prestigious literary prize in France, as well as a prize from the Académie Française.⁴ This enthusiasm for looking at history from the point of view of Second World War perpetrators shows no sign of slowing. The 2017 Prix Goncourt was awarded to Éric Vuillard for his novel *L'Ordre du jour*, which was translated in the United States with the title *The Order of the Day*. Vuillard's book focuses on the smaller acts of treachery and shady business dealings that led to the Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938 (Quinn). The 2017 Prix Renaudot was awarded to Olivier Guez for his novel *La Disparition de Josef Mengele ('The Disappearance of Josef Mengele')*, which narrates the Auschwitz physician's life as he flees his pursuers throughout South America until his death in 1979. Further, Gallimard, one of the leading French publishing houses, entertained the idea of re-printing Louis-Ferdinand Céline's three infamous anti-Semitic pamphlets, the 1937 *Bagatelles pour un massacre (Trifles for a Massacre)*, the 1938 *L'École des cadavres (School for Corpses)*, and the 1941 *Les Beaux draps ('A Fine Mess')*, all collected in *Écrits polémiques ('Controversial Writings')*, before back-peddling after the news caused controversy (Dupuis). Clearly, the subject of Nazis and their collaborators remains on the minds —à l'ordre du jour— of the French literary world.

This trend of focusing on the perpetrators of the war, a literary inclination that scholar Charlotte Lacoste terms "l'ère du 'nazisme décomplexé'" (457) 'an era of unapologetic Nazism,' appears to have

³For an overview of the portrayal of Nazis and collaborators in French, please consult my book (2015) *D'un salaud l'autre: Nazis et collaborateurs dans le roman français ('From One Bastard to Another: Nazis and Collaborators in French Novels')*.

⁴On the role that fictional narratives play in our interpretations and understanding of the war and its legacy, see *Yale French Studies* special issue No.121 *Literature and History: Around "Suite Française" and "Les Bienveillantes"* (2012). Of particular interest are Richard J. Golsan and Philip Watts's preface "Literature and History: Around *Suite Française* and *Les Bienveillantes*," Antoine Compagnon's article "Nazism, History, and Fantasy: Revisiting *Les Bienveillantes*" and Steven Ungar's "The Perpetrator Portrait as Literary and Historical Exercise."

culminated in an interest in Hitler himself, a fad that she feels has become more appealing than reading of victims' testimonies or historians' research. Although alternative histories as a genre often receive little critical attention, prominent literary critics and Holocaust scholars are focused on a "palpable concern about what they regard as the negative effects that fictional representations of Hitler might have" (Butter 8). In *Imagining Hitler* (1985), Alvin H. Rosenfeld "criticizes texts that place Hitler in new contexts for being immoral, for distorting historical reality, and for transforming traumatic events into 'forms of entertainment'" (Butter 8-9).

Any examination of the historical record easily shows that there is no shortage of guesswork and innuendo as it relates to Hitler by historians, authors, and others, especially when it comes to his sex life. Much of it is so extreme that it can easily be classified as scandalous hearsay, which is itself a form of entertainment. Hitler has been suspected of being uncomfortable around the opposite sex, not being able to sexually satisfy a woman, of being impotent, having a castration complex (Heiden 383), or practicing sadomasochism (Langer 193). He has been reproached for being too dominant (Kershaw 284) and too passive (Langer 193). It has been suggested that he was a male prostitute in both Munich and Vienna (Lively and Abrams 84), and that he suffered from syphilis (Langer 185). In some of the more outlandish examples, it has been claimed he engaged in scatology and had "coprophiliac fantasies" (Hayman 142). This list of depravities is hardly exhaustive. Historian Ron Rosenbaum writes that this act of assigning so-called perverse sexual practices to Hitler arises from a refusal to identify with the perpetrators of violence and genocide. There is comfort in viewing Hitler as monstrously perverted because "[t]hen his public crimes can be explained away as arising from private pathology, from his unnaturalness, from a psyche that isn't in any way 'normal', that isn't in any way akin to ours, one whose darkness we don't have to acknowledge as any way related to ours" (104). In this way, *Hitler's* evil, stemming from a distinctly different sexuality, is not akin to what we think of as *our* evil.⁵

But there is still a deep desire to understand Hitler, to know why he committed his atrocities, to strip him bare and see what lies underneath, to demystify the dictator. I contend that fiction is the mechanism used toward these ends. Discussing the Buchenwald memoirs of the survivor Jorge Semprun, who insisted on "the necessity of artifice in literary testimony about the Holocaust" (139), French cultural scholar Susan Rubin Suleiman confirms that, "while it is paradoxical . . . , the notion that fiction can tell the truth more effectively or profoundly than straightforward factual narrative is not at all startling" (138). She also notes that "every narrative is constructed, no matter how 'simple' or

⁵For an overview of nonfictional materials in the fields of sociology, psychology, and history that explains Hitler's evil through an analysis of his perceived sexual practices, consult my chapter "When Real Life Isn't Evil Enough for Fiction. French Postwar Literature and the Relationship between Evil and Sexuality" (102-104) in *The Function of Evil Across Disciplinary Contexts*.

‘artless’ it may appear” (138-39). By portraying Hitler as a character in an alternate history, whether it is as an aspiring artist or a private detective, and by adding perverse sexual details that have counterparts in the historical record, regardless of whether they contain any measure of truth, writers are better able to ascribe emotions to him that history has deemed inappropriate. The Hitler that filled wartime newsreels and sneered from propaganda posters, who orchestrated the Holocaust and epitomizes evil, is a figure too overpowering to be fictionalized. We already know who he is and what he did; to try to change that in ‘too real’ of a manner, to put words in his mouth and thoughts in his head, could be construed as offensive or immoral. But by removing him from that setting, by shaving off his mustache, having Jewish gangsters pummel him into a bloody mess (Tidhar), by having him sleep in the back of a Berlin magazine kiosk (Vermees), or by having him sit down for a therapy session with Sigmund Freud (Schmitt), it is possible for a writer to analyze him and give him thoughts and emotions that might be recognizable to an audience. And if sex plays a role in the tale, all the better. Through fiction, do we achieve the impossible? Through fiction, do we better understand Hitler? And who is this literary Hitler? What can we learn from him and why is he making a comeback? How important of a component is sex to understanding this fictional Hitler? What about humor? An analysis of our three recent French literary works will begin to answer these questions.

In *La part de l'autre*, Franco-Belgian novelist Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt depicts the lives of two parallel characters. One is the Hitler of history, the mass-murderer and architect of the Holocaust, while the other, named Adolf H., is the painter that Hitler might have become had the Vienna School of Fine Arts accepted his application in 1907. Sex is an essential component in Schmitt’s work; he writes of a man whose lack of sexuality, particularly his mounting frustration at being an asexual virgin, plays an important role in the decisions he makes. Schmitt’s Hitler is nicknamed “Le Dictateur vierge” (343) ‘the Virgin Dictator,’ which is also the title of the third part of the novel (254-357); he is 44 years old when he has his first sexual relationship with Eva Braun. Prior to this experience, the pressure to have intercourse has weighed heavily on the German leader, occasionally breaking him; as a 37-year-old man courting a 16-year-old Mimi, his worries about his lack of virility and inability to fulfill her wish that he “qu’il se comportât comme un homme” (313) ‘behave like a man’ become so overwhelming that he begins to cry. Hitler is relieved to return to Munich in order to “ajourner la confrontation sexuelle” (314) ‘postpone the sexual confrontation.’ Later, Hitler finds a satisfying solution to his dilemma in living with his niece, Geli Raubal, which gives him the opportunity to be with a beautiful woman twenty years younger than him “sans subir l’angoisse débilatante de devoir l’honorer sexuellement” (316) ‘without being subjected to the debilitating dread of having to honor her sexually.’ For the *Führer*, his sexual frustrations stem not from a lack of a willing partner or an inability to take pleasure in the act, but rather from the suspicion that he lacks something, which subsequently makes him feel abnormal.

Far from delivering Hitler from his torment, his first sexual experience with Eva Braun instead confirms his revulsion for intercourse, which to him felt like “incontinence” (363). His orgasms are described as ridiculous spasms and convulsions (363) and there is no sexual fulfilment. More than simply unsatisfied with sex, the dictator is fearful of his partner’s genitals, “il redoutait surtout le spectacle du sexe avide de la femme” (363) ‘he especially dreaded the sight of her greedy vagina,’ as if he were afraid of being devoured by his partner.

Hitler’s disgust for sex and the human body is not limited to women, but rather humans in general. In particular, he finds his own body to be deformed and repulsive. Schmitt’s description of the dictator as he stands nude before a mirror, examining himself, is noteworthy. The discrepancy between the image of the strong, self-assured *Führer* of the newsreels juxtaposed with that of the weak Hitler wracked by his physical hang-ups is jarring and makes the scene bizarre and somewhat humorous.

Voilà devant quoi le monde tremblait! C’était grotesque! Le monde entier était grotesque ! . . . Il regarda ses bras mous, laiteux, dont la chair s’égouttait sur le fil de l’os, ses pectoraux qui dégoulinèrent en limaces vers ses aisselles flasques, son ventre plus détendu que tendu. Il s’épargna l’examen déprimant de son sexe qui s’atrophiait de plus en plus sous l’effet de la tension nerveuse et auquel Eva Braun n’avait même plus accès car il tenait à garder toute son énergie pour ses projets. (388)

Here was the presence that was making the world tremble! It was grotesque! The entire world was grotesque! . . . He looked at his limp arms, milky, the flesh of which dripped from the bone, the pectoral muscles which trickled slug-like towards his flabby armpits, his belly more loose than tight. He spared himself the depressing inspection of his penis that atrophied more and more under the effect of the nervous psychological strain and to which Eva Braun did not even have access anymore since he wanted to keep all his energy for his plans.

All the adjectives Schmitt uses denote weakness. This description of the diminished virility of the German dictator is meant to lessen his whole persona, to make him appear to be a flaccid man, an extension of his small, sagging penis. In this scene, Hitler is a pathetic sight and it is understandable why he would find himself grotesque. This adjective is apt for these fictionalized Hitlers. Through the use of humor and sexuality, Hitler becomes an ugly, comically-distorted figure, the literal definition of grotesque.⁶ This emphasis on the

⁶The *Oxford English Dictionary* online defines ‘grotesque’ as “Comically or repulsively ugly or distorted” and “Incongruous or inappropriate to a shocking degree.” The influence of the grotesque on cultural, literary and visual artistic modes encompasses a historical period that can be traced from antiquity to the present. For an overview of its development and evolution in theory, consult *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1957) by literary critic Wolfgang Kayser.

deteriorating appearance of the *Führer* draws a direct line to scholarly conceptualizations of grotesque, which is primarily seen in the “corporeal, material world of the physical body” (Edwards and Graulund 1). Literary critics Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund argue that “Grotesque appearance, particularly when it is presented in an aggressive manner, such as violence, sexuality and consumption, is never passive, so that which is transcribed on the body functions actively, inspiring the monstrous effect in the audience. In this, grotesque bodies reveal the principal significance of the body’s appearance to identity. ...In this context, grotesque bodies are also used as demarcations of otherness and difference” (45). Even Hitler’s doppelganger in the novel, the painter Adolf H., provides a similarly grotesque image of the dictator, as represented by his painting titled “The Virgin Dictator”: “Un homme nu au teint cireux, émasculé, l’entrejambe lisse et dépourvu de toute pilosité, marchait sur une population d’individus pas plus gros que des souris” (343) ‘A naked man with a pasty complexion, neutered, with a smooth crotch devoid of any hairiness, was walking on a population of individuals no bigger than mice.’ Edwards and Graulund state that “grotesque depictions sometimes merge with caricature,” and that the latter also “relies on a metonymic relationship to its subject, for it takes parts of the whole in order to stand in for the totality” (67). In this example, Hitler becomes defined by his tiny penis; his physical shortcoming establishes him as something less, not wholly human, abnormal, and mirrors the outer signs of his deviant character.

The sexual deficiencies that are attributed to Hitler stand in strong contrast to those of his uchronic double, Adolf H., who experiences frequent and fulfilling intercourse, acts that are described at great length, with the various loves of his life, and who never becomes a mass murderer. The scene of Hitler judging himself mirrors another with Adolf H. The doppelganger is taking a bath with his wife and similarly observes his reflection. When Adolf H.’s wife notices, she playfully asks if he likes what he sees. He does: “Mon corps me sert toujours à quelque chose. Surtout à jouir. C’est peut-être pour cela que je suis moins amoché que beaucoup d’hommes de cinquante ans” (395) ‘My body still serves a purpose for something. First and foremost, to orgasm. This is maybe the reason why I am not in as bad of shape as a lot of fifty-year-old men.’ In contrast to Hitler, the painter is comfortable in his skin and “offert” (395) ‘gives himself’ to his wife “impudique” (395) ‘shamelessly.’

Since sexuality plays such a prominent role in *La part de l’autre*, it is not surprising to learn from Schmitt’s diary, found at the end of his novel, that the writer was aware of all the sexual proclivities attributed to Hitler. What is surprising is that Schmitt denounces the innuendo. He writes that the theories on Hitler’s sexuality were “Toujours différente. Toujours perverse. Parfois sadomasochiste. Parfois scatologique. Parfois homosexuelle” (481) ‘Always

This article relies extensively on a more modern understanding of this aesthetic form of expression as discussed by Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund in the recent overview *Grotesque* (2013).

different. Always perverse. Sometimes sadomasochistic. Sometimes scatological. Sometimes homosexual.’ Schmitt views these theories as naïve and dangerous because they are fueled by the idea that “Hitler n’est pas moi, en tout cas pas comme moi” (481) ‘Hitler is not me, not in any case like me.’ Given Schmitt’s depiction of Hitler as “The Virgin Dictator” and a man rife with sexual deficiencies, it is hard to reconcile the words of his diary with the words of his novel. After all, the Hitler of *La part de l’autre* wants to marry his niece, a scandalous and incestuous act. In no small part due to his actions, the three most important women in Hitler’s life (Mimi, Geli, and Eva Braun) all either attempt or succeed in committing suicide. It is hard to imagine how Schmitt’s Hitler wouldn’t be seen as a monster and a grotesque “other.”

La jeunesse mélancolique et très désabusée d’Adolf Hitler by Michel Folco is an historical fiction that retraces the future dictator’s youth, from the meeting of his parents until the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June 1914. Like Schmitt, Folco focuses on Hitler’s sex life as a way to explain his genocidal actions, paying particular attention to his lengthy virginity. Folco cites *Hitler’s Vienna: A Dictator’s Apprenticeship* by Brigitte Hamann (1999) when he opens a chapter with the following notation: “Les rares témoignages concernant Hitler durant les années qu’il passa à Linz et à Vienne concordent sur un point: ses relations avec les femmes sont surtout faites de rêves, de blocages et de craintes. Dans la réalité, il n’y a pas de femme.” (Folco 360) ‘The sparse eyewitness reports on Hitler’s years in Linz and Vienna all agree on one point: his relations to women consisted mainly of dreams, self-protection, and anxiety. There were no actual relationships.’ The implication that Folco grabs hold of is that Hitler’s lack of romantic female companionship played a role in creating a troubled psychology, one that eventually culminated in war and genocide.

At first glance, *La jeunesse mélancolique et très désabusée d’Adolf Hitler* does not appear to contain many graphic depictions of Hitler’s sexuality or sexual practices. However, one noteworthy scene contains many of the common clichés. After having been brutally beaten by his father, spanked with a leather belt until the intense pain causes the teenager to defecate, Hitler becomes aware of an erotic sensation coursing through him when his mother washes his rectum:

Après qu’elle l’eut torché avec un linge trempé dans de l’eau tiède, Klara appliqua du propolis partout où sa peau était déchirée. Remerciant la Providence d’être allongé sur le ventre, ce délicat attouchement sur son fessier le fit inexplicablement bander ; et, comme chaque fois, une inexplicable douleur éteignit son plaisir naissant, le laissant frustré d’il ne savait même pas quoi. (92)

After she had wiped him with a cloth soaked in lukewarm water, Klara applied some propolis everywhere his skin had been torn. Thanking Providence that he was on his stomach, this delicate touching of his

buttocks made him inexplicably get a boner; and, as always, an inexplicable sharp pain turned off his budding pleasure, leaving him frustrated by something he did not even comprehend.

A similar incestuous scene is found in Patrick Besson's *Lui*, when Klara, Hitler's mother, spreads butter on her son's bottom after another beating from his father. The boy wonders if he doesn't intentionally provoke his father into harming him "pour être ensuite consolé et soigné par Klara" (53) '[in order] to then be consoled and taken care of by Klara.' However, when comparing the two versions, Folco's is more overtly sexual and graphically descriptive.

This scene, while short, is powerful, laying an explanatory framework for the *Führer's* later actions. Hitler's first sexual arousal takes place right after he has been beaten and then soils himself, implying both masochistic and scatological sexual behaviors. His erection, originating from his mother's touch, arises from incestuous feelings. This suggestion of incest playing a part in Hitler's sexual identity is reinforced when he watches his pubescent sister, Angela, undress every night (102). La "douleur décourageante" (95) 'the discouraging pain' of the excessive narrowness of his foreskin doesn't deter his voyeurism, though it does cause him great frustration and prevents him from properly functioning sexually. Folco alludes to there being something not entirely "normal" about Hitler's sexuality; not only is his penis "abnormal," but so are his incestuous desires, making him a monster both physically and mentally. Chapter 24 opens with a quote from Sigmund Freud: "In my experience, anyone who is abnormal mentally in any way, whether socially or ethically, is invariably abnormal in his sexual life" (247). In this way, sex and the genocidal acts of the *Führer* must co-exist; one cannot be without the other.

In Besson's *Lui*, sexuality is essential to Hitler's character. Besson goes to great lengths to associate the German dictator with atypical, outlandish sexual practices. *Lui* depicts an ordinary, nameless Parisian man who discovers that he is the reincarnated Adolf Hitler during a hypnosis session. This newfound identity is the pretext for a burlesque pilgrimage and incongruous introspection of the *Führer's* thoughts and beliefs. The novel's mentions of Hitler and his doppelganger's sexuality are as frequent as they are outlandish. The Parisian man does not have regular, ordinary intercourse with his partner, Hanna, who complains that her hands feel no pleasure when she helps him masturbate (57). Like Eva Braun before her, who was deemed "Juste bonne à lui faire une branlette de temps en temps" (136) 'only good for jerking him off now and then,' Hanna is somewhat inconsequential; she exists solely for the personal satisfaction of her partner. The vulgar vocabulary directed at her is meant to reflect Hitler's despising attitude toward his lovers.

The sexual relationship between the Parisian man and Hanna is both mysterious and perplexing: "Il frappa chez Hanna. Elle lui ouvrit aussitôt . . . Elle savait ce qu'il voulait. Elle le fit bien. Elle commençait à avoir la technique. Elle avait le teint pâle, des cernes sous les yeux" (71) 'He knocked on Hanna's door. She immediately opened . . . She knew what he wanted. She did it well.

She started to master the technique. She had a pale complexion, dark rings under the eyes.’ This measure of ambiguity piques the reader’s curiosity. When the Parisian man is under hypnosis, eventually recounting past events in Hitler’s life, Besson introduces a relationship that parallels the one with Hanna: Hitler’s incestuous dalliance with his niece, Geli Raubal. The grotesque nature of their relationship is found not only in what is happening behind closed doors, which the reader cannot see, but also in the way Geli is depicted as a child who calls her uncle by the infantile nickname of “Tonton Adi” (114) ‘Unkie Adi’ while laughing and clapping her hands when he entertains her. Their incestuous relationship ends when Hitler kills Geli (116). Besson’s choice is interesting given that the official historical version of events is that Geli took her own life. While Besson’s depiction of Geli’s death lacks detail or explanation, her doppelganger Hanna’s demise, occurring just a page later, does not: “Pourquoi lui avait-elle dit qu’elle connaissait deux journalistes de la télé et qu’elle allait tout leur raconter y compris qu’elle devait le masturber matin et soir?” (117) ‘Why did she tell him that she knew two television journalists and that she was going to spill everything, including [the fact] that she had to masturbate him mornings and nights?’ Hanna is viciously beaten, then left lying motionless in a pool of her own blood. Hanna’s actions mirror Geli’s, who threatened to report her uncle’s incestuous acts to the anti-Nazi press. In this way, Besson implies that both young women were in some ways responsible for their own murders. Since the scenes appear back-to-back, the line between them blurs. The horrific fate that befell Hanna better enables the reader to imagine what Hitler did to Geli.

In Besson’s *Lui*, sex and violence are intertwined, a symbiosis that is common in the portrayals of Nazis in popular culture, especially after the war’s end. This type of sadomasochistic eroticism in entertainment, commonly referred to as Nazisploitation, often depicts Nazis engaging in sex crimes. In most, women suffer degradation and violence, with stories set in prisons, concentration camps, or brothels. Among the most famous examples are the films *The Night Porter* by Liliana Cavani (1974), about the sadomasochistic relationship between a former concentration camp inmate and her guard, and *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* by Don Edmonds (1974), in which the main character is a Nazi dominatrix with an insatiable appetite for sex. The release of these films corresponded with the *mode rétro*, a “Forties revival” phase that historian Henry Rousso identified as “the expression of the return of the repressed”(127) —“a broken mirror” in the French collective memory of the Occupation.⁷ The

⁷In *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (1991), first published in French in 1987, Henry Rousso identifies a four-stage process in the French collective memory of World War II and the diverse “symptoms” and manifestations of trauma linked to the Occupation. From 1944 to 1954, the “mourning phase”, France focused foremost on the aftermath of civil war, purge, and amnesty. Next, from 1954 to 1971, the Gaullist myth of “resistancialism,” an identification of the Resistance “with the nation as a whole,” facilitated the repression of memories of the civil war. This carefully constructed myth was shattered, the “mirror broken,” during a third phase, from 1971 to 1974, that witnessed the “return of the

1970s saw a sharp increase in “the number of films devoted to or inspired by World War II” (223) and although the *mode rétro* is primarily remembered for classics such as Marcel Ophüls’s *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1968), Louis Malle’s *Lacombe, Lucien* (1974) or François Truffaut’s *The Last Metro* (1980), it also played a role in popularizing the links between Nazism and sexual perversion. Several scenes in *Lui* would not be out of place in any of the aforementioned Nazisploitation films. One example is when the reincarnated Hitler is sodomized by a woman wearing black leather lingerie and an enormous strap-on dildo (133). The pornographic details show the passive Parisian man being dominated: “Elle lui barbouilla l’anus de vaseline, le fit mettre à quatre pattes sur le lit et le sodomisa” (133) ‘She smeared his anus with Vaseline, made him get on all fours on the bed, and sodomized him.’ His virility is further undermined by a vulgar comment of the dominatrix, who is surprised by the presence of both his “couilles” (133) ‘balls.’ The belief that Hitler had malformed genitalia was widespread among Allied troops; a popular and profane British song was called “Hitler Has Only Got One Ball” (Kelley, 208). The words “balls” and “ballsy” have long been associated with the idea of courage; to mock the *Führer*’s testicles as being defective demeaned not only his sexual abilities, but also implied that the Nazi dictator’s leadership was also flawed and weak: “Identifying them with ludicrous, obscene or scatological imagery” was a way of “reducing [the] fear of terrified enemies” (Cleveland, 89).

Similarly, identifying Hitler with such imagery allows novelists to further diminish him. Besson shows a strong familiarity with Nazisploitation clichés, placing Hitler in situations that traffic in the extravagant sexual fantasies attributed to the Nazi leader while simultaneously playing up and mocking the *Führer*’s supposed sexual shortcomings. This perversity attributed to Hitler peaks in a scene where he visits a brothel. An overweight black prostitute, a woman, accepts his request to urinate in his mouth while he masturbates (98). While the sex act itself is meant to be outrageous, so is the identity of his partner. Later, when it is pointed out to him that he made love to a “négresse” (98) ‘negress,’ Hitler contradicts: “Je n’ai pas fait l’amour avec elle: j’ai bu sa pissé” (98) ‘I did not make love with her; I drank her piss.’ This grotesque image contains not only the obvious racial component, but it also has an element of anti-fat bias, a discrimination that isn’t solely a facet of Hitler’s character, but is shared by the writer’s primary audience, French society. Hitler’s choice of prostitute is deliberate; when perusing his options at the brothel, several other prostitutes are presented as being a better fit for a Nazi but are rejected by him.

Later in the novel, Besson further increases the level of outlandish sexual behavior by introducing coprophagy, the eating of feces. The Parisian man

repressed.” The final phase, one of “obsession,” was characterized by the reawakening of Jewish memory and the importance that reminiscences of the Occupation assumed in French political debate” (10).

hopes to find a young woman who would accept to “chier” (128) ‘shit’ in his mouth. From there, the novel’s language becomes ever more vulgar and the sex becomes both omnipresent and bizarre. Hitler has sexual relationships with Martin Bormann and Joseph Goebbels who have been reincarnated as women named Martine (137) and Josepha (167-68). Linked by their grotesque nature and their over-usage, Hitler’s participation in sadomasochism, urophagia, and coprophagy are part of the same ‘joke,’ meant to diminish the former dictator while also making the reader laugh, likely uncomfortably. Besson believes that it is easier to ridicule Hitler’s private sex life than to address the deeper psychological issues of the man who decimated Europe.

Lui’s portrayal of Hitler’s sexuality stands in contrast to those of *La part de l’autre* and *La jeunesse mélancolique et très désabusée d’Adolf Hitler*. Schmitt and Folco focus on the brutality of Hitler’s father, his failure of the entrance exam of Vienna’s Academy of Fine Arts, and his experiences during the First World War as a means of explaining his psyche and how he became a mass murderer. Besson instead paints a significantly different picture, trafficking in stereotypes about Hitler’s sexuality, all meant to ridicule the man. Besson is clearly aware of these myths: “Lui, on le traitait de tous les noms. On l’attaquait sur son physique, ses origines, sa sexualité” (159) ‘Him, he was called every name under the sun. He was attacked on his physical appearance, his origins, his sexuality.’ Martin[e] Bormann declares that sexual perversion is to be associated with being a Nazi (162), just like weekends in the countryside, vegetarianism, sports, or medicine. At one point, Hitler is asked, “*Mein Führer*, y a-t-il un rapport entre l’impuissance sexuelle et le nazisme?” (97) ‘*Mein Führer* is there a connection between sexual impotence and Nazism?’

In addition to this grotesque sexuality, all three novels utilize dark, provocative humor, often intertwining the two. This is reminiscent of a pair of earlier, prominent French works. First is Patrick Modiano’s *La Place de l’étoile* (1968), in which the main character, Raphael Schlemilovitch, an implausibly anti-Semitic Jewish collaborator, is a ruthless rapist who even becomes Eva Braun’s lover. The second is Jonathan Littell’s aforementioned *Les bienveillantes*, centered around SS officer Maximilien Aue, who embodies many of the sexual proclivities ascribed to Hitler and other Nazis, including homosexuality, autoerotic asphyxiation, an incestuous relationship with his twin, fantasies of incest with his mother, sadomasochism, and scatology. The *New York Times* review of *Les Bienveillantes* wittily asked, “Do I have the time and emotional resources to invest in a 1,000-page book on the Holocaust that sounds like a transcription of Passolini’s ‘120 Days of Sodom’?” (Rich). This type of novel is not singular to France, either. Lavie Tidhar’s British novel, *A Man Lies Dreaming* (2014), follows Hitler, now known as ‘Wolf,’ as he scratches out a miserable living as a private detective in 1939 London, a world in which the communists, not the Nazis, came to power in Germany. Herr Wolf’s sexual proclivities are as lewd and debauched as any leveled against the real Adolf Hitler. He engages in phone sex, has friendships with prostitutes who entice and repulse him in equal measure and, most sensationalistic of all,

engages in a bondage-rape fantasy with an SS-style dominatrix: “I will please you, mein herr,” she whispered . . . She pushed her finger deep inside me. Her other hand came round and took hold of me and stroked as she kept up a rhythm. A second finger joined the first, violating me. I shuddered with pleasure, hating her and all women, and thinking of Geli and the things I had taught her to do” (43).

The ‘humor’ of these novels is found in “a form of humorous monstrosity devised for satiric purposes,” as well as the marriage between “the repulsive and the comic,” particularly in the way they go as far as they can to be politically incorrect and thereby provoke their readers (Stott 87). A notable example is found in *Lui*, when Hitler is confused for a Jew, then immediately gets an erection and declares: “‘Oui, je suis juif, je suis un sale Juif!’ Il ne pouvait plus résister : il sortit son sexe et commença à se masturber” (151-2) “‘Yes, I am a Jew, I am a dirty Jew!’” He could not resist any longer; he took out his penis and started masturbating.’ There is the obvious ridiculousness of such an incongruous scene, the reader’s almost involuntary exclamation of “I can’t believe he just said that!,” although whether such a thought is directed at the fictional Hitler or the writer who put those words in his mouth is unclear. Such coarse humor, sexual and otherwise, is an important component in making Hitler grotesque; “it is the manner and proportions in which oxymoronic characteristics are put together and presented that determines its psychological and aesthetic register – from abject buffoonery to white-knuckle unease” (Storr 213). Instead of describing this type of narrative mechanism as grotesque, Debarati Sanyal (2010) talks about “ironic complicity” as “a mode of narration that coerces the reader into complicitous identification with the narrator, and that simultaneously sabotages this identification through irony” (48) when describing narrative mechanisms in the fictional testimony of *Les bienveillantes*’ perpetrator. This also applies to fictional portrayals of the leader of Nazi Germany. There is entertainment to be found when Hitler sits down with his therapist, Sigmund Freud, in *La part de l’autre*, or when Herr Wolf is circumcised by Jewish gangsters in *A Man Lies Dreaming*. Placing these fictional Hitlers into situations that are far-removed from ones in which the historical Hitler lived creates a humorous situation. The more ridiculous, the better.

However, humor as a component of these Hitler fictions is not limited to sex. It is also found in the *Führer*’s recurring gastro-intestinal problems; Hitler’s sexual exploits are strange enough, but it is every bit as bizarre to imagine him sitting on a toilet. In *Lui*, Hitler takes suppository sleeping pills but remains so constipated that he begins to long for his old Parisian life where he managed “un gros caca” (84) ‘a big poop’ every seven hours. The vocabulary is both infantile and embarrassing, further diminishing Hitler’s image. In Folco’s *La jeunesse*, Hitler’s digestive problems start when he develops jealous feelings upon discovering his mother’s pregnancy (73) and mark most of the main events of his youth; meeting his first crush and getting a diploma are among the reasons for his uncontrollable flatulence (151-87). These scatological

jokes are taken to an extreme new level when young Hitler, by now something of a farting impresario, puts on a flatulent performance in order to reclaim his favorite bench from an intruder. “Alors affichant l’air inspiré d’un mélomane qui improvise, Adolf se souleva sur une fesse et se délesta d’un authentique concerto grosso durant lequel l’oreille exercée d’Auguste apprécia l’aisance de l’artiste à moduler les intensités, à passer du *pianissimo* au *poco forte* pour grimper *fortissimo* et conclure *smorzando*” (93) ‘Then displaying the inspired air of an improvising music lover, Adolf raised himself on one buttock and unloaded a real concerto grosso from which August’s well-trained ear could fully appreciate the artist’s ease in modulating pitches and depths, to move from *pianissimo* to *poco forte*, to climb *fortissimo* and conclude *smorzando*.’ The idea of uncontrollably passing gas in public is, for most people, one of great embarrassment; therefore, the image of Hitler suffering such a fate is especially humorous and the fact that, in at least this one instance, he relished it is equally diminishing. The public image of the German dictator at the height of his power is extremely difficult to reconcile with that of a man lacking control over his own bowels. For an author to put him in such a predicament gives the reader a small thrill of revenge at the famous man for falling so low. Even the fictional Hitler is aware of how such vulgar humor diminishes him, how it makes him far less than his historical self: “Plus jamais Leibowitz ne l’appelait *mein Führer*. Maintenant, il avait droit à un petit *monsieur Hitler* Presque méprisant” (Besson 118) ‘Nevermore did Leibowitz call him *Mein Führer*. Now, he was treated to a mere *Mr. Hitler*, almost contemptuously.’

Humor can also be found in the way twenty-first century life is seen through Hitler’s eyes. In *Lui*, the fictional Hitler joyfully credits himself for the progress made by the Germanic race over the last fifty years: “Qui avait généralisé la pratique du sport? Qui avait été l’initiateur de ce qu’on appelait aujourd’hui la diététique?” (72-73) ‘Who had made the practice of sport widespread? Who was the originator of what is nowadays called nutritional science?’ In this way, *Lui* resembles *Er ist wieder da* (*Look Who’s Back*), a bestseller in Germany by Timur Vermes, which features a Hitler who awakens not in the final days of the Second World War of 1945, but in the re-built, modern Berlin of today. This Hitler’s appearance is so out of place among his fellow Germans that he is mistaken for a comedian. From the outset of the novel, Hitler is always the butt of the joke. Twenty-first century Berliners simply cannot take him seriously. Vermes writes within the long tradition of portraying Hitler as a foolish clown, following in the footsteps of Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940), Tex Avery’s *Blitz Wolf* (1942), the Donald Duck cartoon *Der Fuehrer’s Face* (1943) and the later depiction found in Mel Brooks’ satirical film, *The Producers* (1967). In *Er ist wieder da*, the former dictator, much like the Hitler of *Lui*, is a fish out of water, a man literally out of time who, though he still resembles his conventional image, has been left behind on the trash heap of history as the rest of us moved forward without him. Much of the humor of the novel comes from watching events unfold from Hitler’s point of view as he tries to come to grips with the changes that have occurred in his

absence.

Er ist wieder da, however, also warns of a reality where Hitler has been so caricatured, so demystified and ridiculed that he becomes unrecognizable. Vermes's critique is that because of our modern need to be entertained, we are willing to overlook almost anything, even when Hitler is staring us right in the face. At the novel's end, Hitler becomes aware of his potent political talents and decides to fund a political movement, but his peers continue to be unable to recognize his true identity. In this sense, the caricatured memory of Hitler as evil incarnate has been replaced. *Er ist wieder da* suggests that a movement resembling Nazism will inevitably return, enabled and encouraged by technology and a complicit media. Further, it postulates that people won't recognize it for what it is. Similarly, in *A Man Lies Dreaming*, the end of the novel sees the ascension in Britain of a right-wing fascist leader equivalent to Hitler. Both fictional works warn that there won't be another Hitler, not exactly, but that we will continue to be exposed to other forms of seduction, of monsters cut from a similar cloth.

This may explain one possible reason for the resurgence of Hitler and other Nazis in popular French fiction: the need to better understand the recent rise of populism and the extreme right in Europe and across the Occidental world. The Front National (renamed Rassemblement National in 2018), the French populist, radical right-wing party, "which was founded in 1972 from a disparate group of neofascist organizations, in an attempt to unify the extreme Right and present a more acceptable face to the electorate," has steadily gained at the ballot box and has established itself "as a significant political force" (Flood 21). In *Fascism's Return* (1998), Richard J. Golsan warns, "those who have witnessed at close range the Front National's campaign tactics and the effect their coming to power creates among the populace find strong parallels with the rise of Nazism" (7). He states that renowned French intellectuals such as Alain Finkielkraut (1992), Jacques Julliard (1994), and Bernard-Henri Lévy (1994) have all "compared the situation in European democracies to the climate of the Weimar period in its declining and crisis-ridden final years" (Golsan 1). *Fascism's Return* foresaw the success of the Front National candidates Jean-Marie Le Pen and his daughter, Marine Le Pen, who were finalists in the 2002 and 2017 French Presidential elections. The radical right-wing party is now "making gains in every local, European and regional election" and its "presence in the presidential final round" is now taken for "granted" (Chrisafis). Cynically, Besson's fictional Hitler rejoices that "il avait eu plein d'imitateurs, de disciples, de descendants" (77) 'he'd had plenty of imitators, disciples and descendants,' as well as the "innombrables fans qu'il conservait dans le monde des vivants" (77) 'countless fans he retains in the living world.'

However, the use of Hitler as a fictional character may inadvertently provide a new forum to spread fascism's hateful and dangerous ideas: "Because images of Hitler now proliferate, there is a danger that the didactic quality of these representations is being lessened as the Holocaust begins to adopt a metonymic function of wrongdoing in a much broader sense, weakening the

specificities of the Nazi genocide” (Pettitt 95). An important catalyst for this phenomenon resides with the reader. Particularly, how can any author know the political position of their reader? How do readers morally assess the actions of the fictional former dictator? Could their own hatreds be re-affirmed by these literary Hitlers? Jeremy Hawthorn and Jakob Lothe write that there is “no reading, viewing, or listening to a narrative that does not require some ethical sensitivity and the exercise of moral discrimination on the part of the reader, viewer or listener” (6). This idea is echoed by Sanyal in *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (2015):

Aesthetic representations can serve as laboratories for experimenting with practices of remembrance, yet the responsibility to animate their virtual memories lies in their reception. Reading is an ethical engagement, an activity attuned to the mobility of figures and their variable meanings...[R]eading is where the ethics of memory in motion can develop. (22)

So what about these novels appeals to a reader? In an examination of Marcel Ophüls’s documentary *Hôtel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie* (1988), which focuses on the head of the German Security Police’s (SIPO-SD) time in Lyon during the German occupation of France, Suleiman praises the brilliance of the film in “its capacity to pose uncomfortable questions for the viewer – or to put it another way, in its capacity to force the viewer into uncomfortable subject positions in relation to the material” (87). Much like the novels in this study, the documentary “creates a destabilizing effect on the viewer’s understanding, on his or her moral certainties” (87). But no reader or viewer comes to new material from the same starting point. So how could our authors be certain of where their reader stands in regard to what Suleiman calls an “intricate dance of closeness and distance, identification and disavowal” (105)?

Historian André Loez, in an interview with daily French newspaper *Libération*, deplors the current fascination among French intellectual elites for Second World War collaborators and anti-Semites such as Céline, Lucien Rebatet, or Charles Maurras, saying “Comme si le vernis culturel rendait l’antisémitisme plus acceptable et ‘diffusable’” (Faure) ‘as if the cultural veneer made antisemitism more “acceptable.”’ Loez also denounces the trend’s voyeurism. Although Schmitt, Besson, and Folco may have had good intentions in their fictional portrayals of the Nazi dictator, and although their alternative histories try to explain Hitler and the carnage he caused while challenging his popular perception as the epitome of evil, their novels commit the voyeuristic sin denounced by Loez (Faure). Worse, by placing Hitler back in the spotlight, they may also be feeding the political resurgence of the extreme right. Understandably so, all three authors are careful not to give too much attention to the ideological particulars of Hitler’s anti-Semitic, racist discourse, but by failing to clearly address his xenophobic ideas, by not confronting and fully

disarming them, they risk repeating some of the same mistakes that helped bring Hitler to power and, ultimately, the world to war. In *Crisis of Memory and the Second World War* (2006), Suleiman proposes that we ask ourselves the following “salutary question” when reflecting on the evolution of the memory of past events: “How is memory *best* enacted or put to public use?” (8). Put another way; how can we be sure that certain uses of memory aren’t being put to their *worst* use? With this in mind, it is essential that we recognize that there are ethical stakes in literature, that fiction can spread lies just as easily as truths: “Storytelling practices may help define who we are, refine our moral sensibilities and open new possibilities of experience, action and self-invention, but, at the same time, they may be the vehicle of simplifications, obfuscations or plain lies that corrupt our moral standing” (Meretoja and Davis 1).⁸

Offering a multiplicity of Hitlers or deconstructing his imagery may give twenty-first century readers different lenses through which to view him, but it is questionable whether any bring us closer to the truth of who he really was. While the use of various psychological explanations, gratuitous sex, and dark humor may demystify Hitler or make him appear more human, an overindulgence in any of them also makes it significantly harder to grasp the reality of the man, almost to the point where it becomes impossible to understand his place in history or the current modern world. Literary and cultural historian Michael Butter warns that “the roots of the Third Reich and the origins of the Holocaust must not be reduced to Hitler’s personality and his childhood traumas, but that larger structural and social forces were at work there” (179). The focus on Hitler or other high Nazi dignitaries, such as Mengele in Guez’s novel, is a disservice that prevents us from looking at the broader mechanisms that contributed to the rise of the *Führer* and totalitarianism. A small exception to this can be found in *L’ordre du jour*, the winner of the 2017 Prix Goncourt, which reexamines the meeting of 24 German industry leaders with Hitler in 1933, and focuses not only on the perpetrators but also the mechanisms that led to the Anschluss, the 1938 annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany, and the subsequent outbreak of the Second World War.

Making fun of Hitler by painting him as sexually grotesque is not only a great source of entertainment but also a way of reassuring ourselves that we are nothing like him. However, whether we want to admit or not, Hitler was human, a product of his times and environment. If we fail to address how a man like him came to be, even if we try to find the answer to this question through fiction, we run the risk of blinding ourselves to the arrival on the scene of someone who would follow in the *Führer*’s footsteps.

⁸For an exploration of the ethical potential and risks of storytelling, consult recent volumes *Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative* (2018), edited by Hanna Meretoja and Colin Davis, *Traces of War: Interpreting Ethics and Trauma in Twentieth-Century French Writing* (2018) by Colin Davis, and *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History and the Possible* (2018) by Hanna Meretoja.

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