

“Mulisch Mulls over Hitler”

Siegfried

Harry Mulisch

Trans. Paul Vincent

Viking

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by Jeff Bursey

Harry Mulisch's novels have two notable features. First, their consistent interest in questions or issues which many people consider at some point, while classifying them as difficult, if not impossible, to resolve: where and when do the repercussions of war end and do they end at all; is there life beyond the material plane; do we have free will; does science or religion offer the best guide to conduct and provide the most productive avenue of inquiry into life's mysteries. Second, there is in Mulisch's work a residing intelligence, that may initially appear too high-brow and serious, but is ultimately revealed as welcoming, ironic, playful. Considered a major writer by such figures as John Updike and J.M. Coetzee, Mulisch's reputation has steadily grown, built with patience since his first novel appeared in 1952.

Born in Haarlem, Netherlands, in 1927, to a Jewish mother and an Austrian father much older than his wife, Mulisch and his mother escaped almost certain death due largely to his father's connections to high-ranking German officials. Working in a formerly Jewish bank, aware of what was happening to Jews throughout Europe, he was the family's means of salvation. Both parents survived the war, though as a collaborator Mulisch's father spent time in prison. It has been said that each work by Mulisch has been about the Second World War, in one form or another. His literary output contains plays, short stories, essays and poetry, much of it untranslated into English and known primarily to Dutch readers.

The first work to attract a large international audience was *The Assault* (1982; trans. 1985). A Nazi policeman is killed by the Netherlands Resistance in early 1945, and his body is deposited in front of a house, prompting the Gestapo to take revenge on the unlucky inhabitants of that home. Anton Steenwijk is the only member left alive, and he returns to his homeland several years later to confront the neighbours and friends responsible for the death of his parents and brother. One may want to say 'indirectly' responsible, and that distinction is part of what this novel explores. The reader is made Anton's silent companion, and cannot help but judge the actions of others. Told with concision, *The Assault* addresses the consequences of deeds which seemed fitting at the time they were committed. It was adapted for the screen and became an award-winning movie (1987), bringing to Mulisch a broad English-language readership. The much longer *The Discovery of Heaven* (1992; translated in 1996 by Paul Vincent), also recently made into a movie, pits science and religion, humans and divine beings, against each other, and ends on a bleak note. One critic considers it a novel of ideas, which is surely true, but it is more than that. In this ambitious work ideas are nicely balanced by compelling interactivity between people. While there is physics and metaphysics throughout, there is also humour, friendship, love, all in service to a serious conceit: that an already remote God is abandoning humanity. For

most of its length this novel entertains and stimulates, though its ending is weak. The characters are odd in their interests and views of the world, yet their peculiarities fit in with the plot and construction of the book. Angels act in bureaucratic fashion, and show no fondness for humans—“And they’ve been busy exterminating us for some considerable time, without realizing it...,” as one celestial being puts it, echoing the Holocaust—which is completely removed from the conventional, sentimental representations. That this novel proved so popular to readers puzzled critics, and even an admirer of Mulisch like Coetzee tried to re-write the novel while reviewing it so it would appeal more (to him, and he believed, to others). The novel is highly regarded because Mulisch entertains readers while investigating common topics in a manner that does not condescend to or belittle either the subject matter or the audience.

The Procedure (1998; translated in 2001 by Paul Vincent) presents a familiar plot: a scientist interferes with the natural order to create life from clay. This revisitation of an old myth links genetic research with Cabalism (genetic manipulation is viewed as a form of Cabalism), as Victor Werker creates a contemporary version of a golem. In a series of documents Werker explains his philosophy, of work and life. The novel begins with an urgent admonition:

“Yes, of course I can come straight to the point and start with a sentence like: *The telephone rang*. Who’s ringing whom? Why? It must be something important, otherwise the file wouldn’t open with it. Suspense! Action! But I can’t do it that way this time. On the contrary. Before anything can come to life here, we must both prepare ourselves through introspection and prayer. Anyone who wants to be swept along immediately, in order to kill time, would do better to close this book at once, put the television on, and sink back on the settee as one does in a hot foam bath. So before writing and reading any further we’re going to fast for a day, and then bathe in cool, pure water, after which we will shroud ourselves in robes of the finest white linen.”

While asking the reader to remain calm, the narrator reveals his own inner turmoil. The very first sentence of the next paragraph reads: “I’ve switched the telephone and the front doorbell off and turned the clock on my desk away from me; everything in my study is waiting for the events to come.” Readers are in the middle of a critical situation, and the pacing, though it varies over the course of the novel, is masterfully controlled, allowing poignancy and intellectually weighty matters their share of space.

In *Siegfried* (2001; translated in 2003), Mulisch appears by way of an alter-ego whose age, career and health are almost the same as his creator’s. Rudolph Herter is an elderly writer, his health generally good despite a bout with cancer and impaired hearing. He is somewhat comical, a mixture of ego and whimsy, possessing a self-denigrating humour that nevertheless indicates he takes himself seriously. This is very like Mulisch, some have said. Also like his creator, Herter has daughters by his ex-wife, and one son by his female companion, Maria, who has travelled with him to Vienna, where Herter is scheduled for television and print interviews, and to give a reading from his successful 1,000-page novel *The Invention of Love* (Herter’s *The Discovery of Heaven*). During the t.v. interview he states that one may write “from some imagined, highly improbable, highly fantastic but not impossible fact and move from mental reality into social reality.” His example for such a fantasy is a hometown boy, Adolph Hitler. This is picked up by other interviewers, and by the Dutch ambassador: “‘Mr. Herter is taking on Adolf Hitler,’ said Schimmelpenninck with a deadpan expression. ‘The Führer has got it coming

to him.” Herter has written on Eichmann (just as Mulisch did), but to him Hitler is “the most extreme figure in world history.” His challenge is to understand this man who, in his view, is the embodiment of Nothing and the opposite of Being.

This short novel takes its time getting to its destination. Old-fashioned in pace, traditional in structure, a mix of character study, historical ‘romance’ and a philosophical inquiry into evil, it resembles the complacent Herter, whose popular novel is not original in either form or content, consisting as it does of a reworking of /9/ the tale of Tristan and Isolde. Herter thinks about his daughters and son, has a spat with Maria (whose reading of a book “on the problems of gifted children” thematically relates to Herter), reflects on literary recognition, and considers the problems of his next literary work. There is nothing exciting or unusual in any of this. Clearly, he is being set up for a shock. The shock will come from Ullrich and Julia Falk, a couple living in a seniors’ home who see his television interview and attend the reading. After it is over they approach Herter to say they possess something that will provide clues to the core of Hitler which the novelist has been circling around for years. Herter visits them the next day. Presented with the life story of Siegfried, Hitler and Eva Braun’s son, he abandons his own notions. “Herter sighed. He could forget his own story now... All he wanted to do was listen to theirs.”

What follows from that conversation is an effective poetical meditation. After hearing about what the Falks had witnessed, Herter makes that vital movement from thinking about Hitler’s life to imagining it, through Eva Braun. While Hitler had always been an unknowable figure, iconic and hollow, in those imagined moments, he becomes less enigmatic. In solitude back in the hotel, while waiting to leave for the airport, Herter recreates the last days in the bunker, completing the story begun by the Falks, and thereby also completing his lifelong mission.

While the telling is accomplished, Mulisch’s tale has an arguable thesis. At the lunch held in the Dutch embassy, Herter describes why Hitler is very different from his fellow tyrants:

“When the ambassador had finished, Herter said that Hitler, precisely because of his enigmatic nature, was the dominant twentieth-century figure. Stalin and Mao were also mass murderers, but they were not enigmatic; that was why so much less had been written about them. There had been countless people like them in world history, and there still were and would always be, but there had been only one Hitler. Perhaps he was the most enigmatic human being of all time.”

Herter’s thinking invites examination. Some pages later he describes how his hearing has been damaged in one ear by anti-aircraft fire during a visit to Cuba in 1967 when, along “with scores of other European artists and intellectuals,” he witnessed the commemoration of Castro’s “failed attempt at revolution.” Herter does not express an opinion about Castro or about the state of Cuba, as it was or as it is, which seems odd. But it may provide insight as to why Stalin, political father of Castro, is not the same to Herter as Hitler. Anne Applebaum, in *Gulag: A History*, writes that “the crimes of Stalin do not inspire the same visceral reaction as do the crimes of Hitler.” One of her conclusions is that “it was harder for the intellectual descendants of the American and French Revolutions to condemn a system which sounded, at least, similar to their own.” Furthermore, to look again at the Second World War and consider what it meant to have the USSR as an ally would require a swallowing act which most would find impossible: “No one wants to admit that we defeated one mass murderer with the help of another.” The opening of former USSR archives means that it is increasingly possible to write more about

Stalin; eventually, it will be possible to write about Mao in the same manner. Records on Hitler have been widely available for decades, and eyewitnesses spoke (or were forced to speak) while memories were fresh. To say that one tyrant is worse than some other means little to those who suffered. To isolate one and place him above others who directed innumerable acts of horrid brutality is to make oneself intellectually blind; it reveals an insensitivity to the memory of those killed by firing squads, or by starvation, in mass executions or secret assassinations, in camps or in villages. In *Siegfried*, Herter repeatedly declares that Hitler's nature defies comprehension, and he views him as exceptional, as many others do. Those who believe Stalin or Mao are equally unfathomable, if for different reasons, will not be persuaded—as this novel purports—that Hitler is unique.

Despite that disagreement, Mulisch's latest novel is intriguing, as it discusses, in a tone pitched halfway between ponderous and breezy, fundamental questions about evil and individual character. Herter's analysis of Hitler after hearing the Falks' story captures a certain intellectual excitement, and *Siegfried* compels one to consider its ideas. The Nobel-worthy Mulisch once again has proven his considerable narrative strengths can accommodate sombre reflections.

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