

PART II

Between the Man and the (Nazi) Symbol

INTRODUCTION

This part seeks to align two distinct chapters in ways that may first require explanation. The first chapter seeks to consider testimonies written by Nazi perpetrators, making use both of memoirist texts and of testimony offered in the run up to, or during, the Nuremberg trials. The second chapter that makes up this part returns to fiction, looking specifically at the means through which the figure of Adolf Hitler is portrayed across a variety of examples. Although these two chapters adopt contrasting theoretical approaches, they both aim to address the oscillations between the humanity of their protagonists, and their mythologised position within the Western imagination.

One of the primary concerns of this project as a whole has been the undoing of the myth of the Holocaust perpetrator by unravelling the notion of ‘evil’ that is so often referred to in discussions about the genocide. Through this research, I hope to enhance a more thorough and objective account of these figures, at least insofar as they appear in artistic representations. Yet these issues are particularly pronounced in the two chapters under discussion, here. That is because these recognisable historical figures – the Nazis who were responsible for the implementation of the so-called final solution; and Adolf Hitler, who instigated and implemented the social and political structure that enabled the atrocities against the Jews to occur, legally, as part of the policies of the Third Reich – provoke automatic responses in the reader. Such reactions depend upon the reader’s prior

knowledge of the Holocaust, which he or she inevitably brings to bear on any encounter with these figures. Whilst these kinds of reactions are understandable and, to a large extent, justifiable, they are premised on the continued dissemination of the perpetrator myth, at least insofar as they suggest an unwillingness to engage with potentially humanising rhetoric. This, of course, is a natural response: Why would a reader wish to engage with justifications from those responsible for one of the greatest atrocities in human history? Nevertheless, engaging with these figures in and through literature may still be able to teach us important lessons about the Holocaust, especially in relation to the tensions that exist between the human and the Nazi aspects of the characters involved.

The ways in which these tensions emerge vary. In the chapter that examines perpetrator testimony, the human aspects of character are supposedly subjugated to the needs of the State. As is the case throughout this project, a central facet of these issues is the role of determinism, and the ways in which particular sociopolitical contexts can influence individual attitudes and patterns of behaviour. These considerations feature particularly strongly in perpetrator testimonies, in which the authors attempt to use these considerations as a means of displacing their individual culpability. We saw similar paradigms emerging in the fictional texts discussed in part one, suggesting their continued presence as an underlying philosophical problem. The chapter examining fictional portrayals of Adolf Hitler, on the other hand, seeks to consider Hitler's position in Western memory, and questions whether or not Western society seems ready to move beyond motifs of evil into more elaborate understandings of the Nazi leader. In sum, both chapters foreground and challenge the way that we, as readers and human beings, anticipate and respond to these figures through the interweaving of their humanity and their mythological status as embodiments of 'evil'.