

CHAPTER 17

George Steiner:
Singling out the Jewish
“Invention of Conscience”



In which a character named A.H. escapes from its famous literary creator—who is accused of “playing with fire”

It is, in a certain sense, a Frankenstein story: about a frightening creation that escaped from its creator. The creator is George Steiner, one of the foremost men of letters in the English-speaking world. His creation: a fictive character called “A.H.,” who is transparently Adolf Hitler.

George Steiner’s Hitler began life as a figure in a literary fantasy, a sophisticated “survival myth” parable about a Hitler who’d escaped the bunker in 1945, and who—thirty years later—is finally tracked down, put on trial, and forced to defend himself, to explain himself.

But something disturbing has happened with the Hitler in Steiner’s fable: He explained himself far too well. He did more than escape the bunker, it seemed to some—he escaped Steiner.

Even some of Steiner’s most thoughtful supporters in the bitter controversy over Steiner’s Hitler novel, *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.*, believe that in some way “A.H.” escaped him.

“It scared the hell out of me,” Steiner himself told me, recalling the first time he came face-to-face with a living embodiment of the Hitler figure he’d created. The occasion was the opening of the London stage production of his

novel. It was the first time Steiner saw his Hitler character in the flesh. Until then, his Hitler character was just the barest of initials on a page. Now, suddenly, “A. H.” was a charismatic, full-bodied, full-blooded figure bestriding the stage, mesmerizing an audience with words of self-justification Steiner put in his mouth. It was the first time he heard the applause.

The dispute over the nature of that applause is a deeply disturbing one to Steiner, who has both an enormous scrupulosity about—and an enormous distrust of—the power of language, of the Word.

Toward the close of our conversation in Steiner’s Cambridge University study, I read him a quotation from an account in the London *Observer* of the play and the fierce controversy that surrounded the production—the pickets outside, the applause within. The *Observer* critic said the audience appeared to be applauding Hitler’s speech in the play, the final epic soliloquy of self-justification Steiner had crafted for his Hitler character; the words that close the play.

“Oh no!” said Steiner, horrified. “Oh no, no, no, no, *no*,” he insisted five times. The applause was not for what *Hitler* said, he told me, but for the play as a whole, which ends a moment after Hitler’s speech. In other words, they were applauding *him*—or the actors—not Hitler.

Even assuming Steiner is correct about who the applause was for, he concedes he knows that the Hitler character he created might be dangerous, even on the page. He was aware of it, he told me, from the moment he put his pen down at the end of a three-day sleepless “fever dream” of composition. He was aware he’d created an entity that needed to be controlled rather than unleashed indiscriminately upon the world.

“The moment I finished it,” Steiner told me, “I pledged to myself that neither in Hebrew nor in German would I allow it to be translated. I’m not going to have the Germans hear that in their own language.”

“Was it because you fear Hitler’s speech could escape from its context?” I asked him.

“Yes, yes,” he said, “and it could be *used*. There have been pirated attempts in German, but they’ve been stopped,” he said. They’ve been stopped, but it’s out there in circulation, however unauthorized: Steiner’s Hitler speaking German to Germans, explaining himself, excusing himself, blaming the Jews for everything including himself.

The notion of a German edition of his Hitler is troubling to Steiner, but it doesn’t seem to trouble him as much as seeing his Hitler in the flesh. And even more than the sight, it was the voice: hearing his voice from the stage, “scared the hell” out of him. There is something more dangerously potent to him about the voice, the word made flesh, than the word on the page alone. Perhaps it is because Steiner’s lifelong horrified fascination with Hitler began—at age five—with the sound of Hitler’s voice.

The story of how one of the foremost Jewish intellectuals of the postwar era brought a Hitler figure to life and how—golemlike, Frankenstein style—this Hitler escaped to haunt him begins with Steiner as a child, sitting in front of the radio, listening to that frightening, terrifying voice.

"I was born in 1929, so from '33 on my earliest memories are sitting in the kitchen hearing The Voice [of Hitler] on the radio."

The kitchen was in Paris. "My father was from Czechoslovakia. [He met] my mother in Vienna. I was born in Paris. My father had left Vienna because he believed that Austrian anti-Semitism was going to explode one way or another. He couldn't have guessed it would be Mr. Schicklgruber that was coming. But he was always astonished that the [Eastern European] pogroms had stopped short of Austria—Austrian anti-Semitism seemed to be irremediable, as it is today."

Paris proved to be no refuge. Steiner was eleven when his family had to flee France shortly before the Germans marched in. "By great good luck we were able to get out with the last ship to sail from Genoa," one heading for the United States.

What his father felt about Austrian anti-Semitism, Steiner felt about the French variety. "It is very odd, given the Dreyfus Affair, that it [the Holocaust] didn't happen in France. In some ways, it was ghastly bad luck for Germany that Hitler—it *could* have happened in France. French anti-Semitism had a kind of systemic power and political profit which it didn't have in Germany. Had it not been for Hitler's quote unquote peculiar genius, had there been a French Hitler, he might have had an even quicker ascent to power."

"You don't agree with those who explain Hitler as somehow a product of the German soul?" I asked him.

"Not at all. Not at all. On the contrary. German distaste about the vulgarity of Hitler's racism ran very, very deep. The Prussians never bought it, the Bavarians had their own particular case against him. They never bought it. In France you can, at any time, get an explosion of French chauvinism against Jews. The Dreyfus Affairs are French. The first plan to ship Jews to Africa did not originate in Germany."

"The Madagascar Plan?"

"French," Steiner says.

If it was not the German soul, Steiner believes, there was something in the German language that peculiarly suited what he called "Hitler's quote unquote peculiar genius." He heard it in that voice on the radio: "The overwhelming power was there. And the ease with which he got away with the Rhineland matter suggests a reading of the weakness of the West which was somnambular, that of a man who was a political genius."

That word "somnambular," suggesting a paradoxical state of unconscious

consciousness—a mind both spellbound and spellbinding. Caligari-like—is a recurrent one in Steiner's description of Hitler. A Hitler who is a kind of medium for the evil genius of the German language itself. He speaks of Hitler's language being like "antimatter" to ordinary language.

"Yes, yes, that's what my novel tries to show, among other things. It is antimatter. He is one of the greatest masters of the language. As are [Martin] Luther's pamphlets asking that all Jews be burned. German language has—all languages can have it—but in the German language, Hitler drew on a kind of rhetorical power which, in a way that is perhaps a little bit peculiar to German, allies highly abstract concepts with political, physical violence in a most unusual way. . . . And [Hitler] was easily a genius at that, absolutely no doubt about it."

The essence of the genius, Steiner insists, is not so much in the written word, but the embodied voice. "It's a hard thing to describe, but the voice itself was mesmeric," he says, recalling the radio addresses. It was specifically the physicality rather than the metaphysicality that mesmerized, he told me. "The physique is—the amazing thing is that the *body* comes through on the radio. I can't put it any other way. You feel you're following the gestures. [Marshall] McLuhan has a famous thesis that it [Hitler's charisma] wouldn't have worked on TV. I think that's balderdash. Hitler would have been the ultimate master on TV—all you need to look at is the Riefenstahl films of the rallies to see how he mastered every image, every gesture."

The fascination and the distrust of speech, the love and hate for the power and terror of language, has been at the very heart of Steiner's remarkable career as literary prodigy and prodigal. After earning degrees from the University of Chicago and Harvard and spending a stint at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, he made a decision to return to England and the Continent; he held dual professorships at Cambridge and the University of Geneva. The return was not casual, it was the fulfillment of a paternal injunction.

"It was my father's central resolution that I go back to Europe," he told me. "Because—although there were wonderful opportunities in America—for my father, for me not to have come back would have meant that Hitler had won his boast that Europe would be *Judenrein* [Jew-free]. And that he couldn't bear."

There is something in this that echoes Emil Fackenheim's injunction to post-Holocaust Jews, his commandment that Thou shalt not grant Hitler any posthumous victories. But there is also something very idiosyncratic in the way Steiner formulates it: "for *me* not to have come back" would be decisive—almost as if Hitler's posthumous victory or defeat would have been decided not by whether Europe was Jew-free but whether or not it was Steiner-free.

It's the kind of casual hubris that has made Steiner such a controversial figure, an intellectual provocateur who both dazzles and outrages. An admiring

introduction to a book of essays about Steiner's work speaks of his "greatness. . . . The shocking massiveness of his learning. . . . the prodigiousness of his competence in the major Western languages, the speculative power of his. . . . reflections, the brilliance of his textual commentary; the piercing eloquence of his prose. . . . [an] *oeuvre* that, in its puissant majesty, is virtually without parallel." But this same commentator nonetheless acknowledges that "an enormous amount of ill will toward him is harbored within the Anglo-American university community" because "he can seem too vehement, hortatory, overbearing; he raises his voice in public. . . . Conventional academicians cannot forgive his polymathic virtuosity."

How much Steiner's Jewishness enters into the resentment he engenders is a difficult question. The suspicion of some that his Jewishness had in the past denied him the honors in the Oxbridge academic community that his accomplishments should have commanded may be matched by the Oxbridge community's resentment of the implicit imputation of genteel anti-Semitism to it.

But it cannot be gainsaid that Steiner's speculations are often designed to be not just vehement and hortatory but profoundly provocative. Such is certainly the case with his assault on language—and civilization itself—for its guilty implication in the Hitler horror, an assault that became the central theme of his work with the publication in 1967 of *Language and Silence* and then in 1975 of *After Babel*, the nonfiction predecessor to his notorious Hitler novel.

Both works raised the question of the potential diabolism within language itself and implicitly addressed the relationship between Hitler and language: Did the evil of the Holocaust come into being because of Hitler's power to manipulate language to bad ends, or was there something perverse—something demonic and Hitlerian—in the very essence of the language and the civilization built upon it? Something that expressed itself *through* Hitler. Steiner famously challenged the notion that language and culture were "civilizing" factors with his image of a death-camp guard reading great German literature and listening to great German music and then proceeding to go out and stoke the great German crematoria.

This issue can be found at the heart of some of Steiner's most daring and provocative speculations. Consider the suggestion he made to me about the way the language of Kafka might not only have foreshadowed but somehow *created* Hitler.

I'd been struck by something Steiner had written about Kafka's *Metamorphosis*: that the word "*Ungeziefer*"—the word Kafka used in 1922 to describe the kind of insect poor Gregor Samsa found himself transformed into—was the very same word Hitler used to characterize Jews in his earliest speeches: vermin. Were you the first to point this out? I asked Steiner.

"Yes, that's in my very earliest work," he said. "That's in *Language and Silence*. And it seemed to be—and I still don't know the answer to this—such is the exactitude of Kafka's foresight in 'The Penal Colony' and *The Metamorphosis*, such is the *authority*, that it raises a ghastly question: Are prophecies self-fulfilling? I have no answer to that."

"That's an interesting idea. Do you mean—?"

"At a certain level, does a prophecy start engendering that which it has foreseen?" he asks.

"Just by its presence in the world? You can't say Hitler read Kafka, obviously."

"No, of course not, he never heard of it. But it was *there*. It was suddenly *there* as a possibility."

"Kafka as a source of Hitler?"

"As a source of the concentration-camp world, of the world of the bureaucracy of murder. In Kafka's case, we're dealing with the single most powerful act of prophecy ever. Karl Kraus is the other. Karl Kraus [the Viennese literary satirist] says in 1909, 'Soon in Europe they will make gloves out of human skin.' That's 1909! And Kraus, another Jew on the margin, saw it *absolutely clearly*, coming out of the Vienna situation."

But with Kafka, Steiner is going further than asserting the kind of prophetic foresight he attributes to Karl Kraus. With Kafka, he's coming close to an almost black-magic view of the dark power of words: that they have a spell-like power to bring into being that which had been inconceivable before they were uttered—something more radical than a prophetic relationship, a *causal* one. I don't think he believes, literally, that Kafka made Hitler possible; I think he's pressing a metaphoric correspondence to its limits, and the explicit parallels between Kafka's "Penal Colony" world and the death-camp universe have been persuasively challenged by Lawrence Langer. But it is Steiner's *need* to see them is what is most of interest. It is testimony to his awe and distrust of the power of language. It reflects his profoundly ambivalent attitude toward European civilization in relation to Hitler: Was Hitler a culmination of dark forces within European civilization or an aberration from its values? I believe this is what is behind Steiner's touching preoccupation with Hitler's recess schedule in junior high school and his obsession with the lost works of Viennese street photographers.

"I am the first to ask that we comb every photograph [of Vienna]—it hasn't been done yet—to see whether by chance we have him [Hitler] on a tramway or street with Freud and Mahler. Now, remember, he also goes to the same school as Wittgenstein."

Steiner is so obsessed with this connection that he's researched the recess hours of that school at Linz. Hitler and Wittgenstein were "two years apart at

school, but I have looked into this. At eleven or eleven-fifteen, as in all European schools, there's recreation—you go out in the yard and play. There's no doubt they were in the same yard. And I find it almost impossible to believe that on the Ringstrasse [in Vienna] he didn't cross the men I've named [Freud and Mahler]. Of course he did. And it is conceivable that a street photographer—you know, with their big tripods and the thing over their heads. . . . It's conceivable, one captured them together."

I wondered what could be the source—the point—of Steiner's peculiar fascination with the possibility that Hitler, Freud, Mahler, and Wittgenstein could be found on the same piece of photo paper or in the same recess yard. On reflection, I believe it has something to do with Steiner's uneasy wavering between the poles of that key divide in Hitler-explanation literature: the divide between the aberrationist and culminationist camps.

On the one hand, Steiner can call Hitler "a singularity," an aberrant freak of human nature with a "peculiar genius," but in Steiner's theoretical works, he comes across as a culminationist, taking the darker view that Hitler was a product, the culmination of the dark side of European civilization, of the cursedness of language which underlies and shapes that civilization. In this view, the evil is in the Word itself; Hitler is merely the somnambular medium that gave voice to it.

Thus Steiner's obsession with finding a photo that captures Hitler with such avatars of European thought as Wittgenstein and Freud: Seeing a Hitler who emerged from the same photo emulsion as these paragons of European and Jewish civilization would then symbolize, fix in silver nitrate Steiner's vision of a Hitler who emerged from the same underlying matrix of culture that produced that civilization's highest achievements. Thus, the one is inseparable from the other; the fabric of the civilization that produced Wittgenstein is implicated nonetheless in the causation of Hitler. And so, when we imbibe the distillation of civilization's finest fruits, we are inevitably also drinking from a poisoned chalice.

His preoccupation with the photo-emulsion image of Hitler, Steiner disclosed to me, was the source of what became his most notorious and controversial work, the novel in which he addressed the Hitler mystery most directly. A 1919 photograph of Hitler set him off, he says.

"That's the center of the novel," he says, "that photograph." It's a real, albeit obscure photo, he says, that shows "Hitler standing in the pouring rain like a beggar. It's 1919, I believe, when he was a discharged corporal without a penny and nobody's even stopping as they hurry by on a Munich street corner. And a year later, a hundred people [stop], a few years later ten thousand and then ten million, and this is something which I come back to and back to in my thinking. It is a terrifying proof of the omnipotence of the Word. Even if it is an *anti-Word*."

The notion of an anti-word comes from the same speculative vein in Steiner as the notion of Hitler's language as antimatter, fusing, perhaps too casually, concepts from ancient cabalistic legends and up-to-the-minute quantum physics. This was the sort of feverish speculation that gave rise, Steiner told me, to the "fever dream" in which he gave birth to the Hitler novel and the Hitler character, his Frankenstein creation.

"I was in Geneva, and it actually took only three days and nights. It was a single—total rush [in which he wrote] two things, Lieber's speech [an attempt to capture the hideous pathos of the death-camp victims in maimed and fragmented sentences] and the speech of A. H.," as his Hitler character is referred to in the text of the novel, "Matter and antimatter."

Why then? I asked him. Was there anything about the circumstances of his life that brought forth the fever dream of creation at that point?

"Possibly—a naive guess," he says with surprising candor. "It could be that it was the point at which it became evident that my wife and children would be staying in our new home in Cambridge. She has an appointment [a professorship in history] here. And that we would have to explore the very difficult separate lives. And that may have triggered certain intensities. I wouldn't know, but it came in one extremely simple—it wrote itself. It wrote itself and then had its very complicated destiny."

Before getting into that complicated destiny, by which Steiner means the fierce attacks on it and the Frankenstein-like escape of his Hitler character, let's look more closely at what Steiner actually wrote in that three-day fever dream. Fever, in fact—in one form or another—infects the novel. Set in the feverish heat of the steamy, swampy rain forest, where almost all its characters become progressively infected with malaria and other, worse forms of fever, it is a trek through the jungle that becomes a trek back into the fever dream of twentieth-century history.

The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H. is a philosophical novel that makes use of a pulp-fiction premise: Hitler is alive in South America. Hitler escaped the bunker, as the survival myth has it. He's been living comfortably in South America but when he hears that a search team of Israeli Nazi-hunters is on his trail, he flees to the depths of the rain forest.

The novel opens with the Nazi-hunter team catching up to him there, taking prisoner the frail, gray ninety-year-old the Führer has become, signaling their team leader back in civilization, in San Cristóbal, that they're beginning the trek back out. But Hitler's too weak to walk, and his captors become too weakened with fever to carry him. Deep in a malarial swamp, eaten alive by infectious insects, they realize they'll never succeed in making it all the way back, in bringing him to justice. And so they decide that before they all die, they'll put Hitler on trial right there in the jungle.

Meanwhile, their radio signal has been intercepted by various intelligence

operatives of the Western powers who fought Hitler. In London, Sir Leslie Ryder, a caricature of Hugh Trevor-Roper, is alarmed by the political problems a Hitler trial would cause. Curiously, Steiner has chosen to put into his Trevor-Roper figure's mouth the characterization of Hitler favored by Trevor-Roper's archrival Alan Bullock. Sir Leslie specifically calls Hitler a "mountebank," the very word Trevor-Roper reviles as the symbol of what he believes was Bullock's original misapprehension of Hitler. Sir Leslie derides Hitler as "actor to the end—that's the secret of him," the Hitler-as-cynic characterization favored by Emil Fackenheim and Bullock but rejected by Trevor-Roper, who sees Hitler as unfeignedly possessed. Sir Leslie then wonders if the man found in the rain forest is the real Hitler or, in a fiendishly ironic trick of fate, the look-alike double Hitler was alleged to have used on occasion for security purposes—"the shadow, the mask of him," the Hitler actor rather than the actor Hitler.

On the other hand, Emmanuel Lieber, the commander of the Israeli team who is waiting at the San Cristóbal base camp for their return, has no doubt it is the real Hitler they have. But he expresses less triumph than dread, dread of Hitler's diabolical antimatter language. He radios his team to tell them whatever they do, don't talk to him, don't listen to him, "Gag him if necessary, or stop your ears as did the sailor. If he is allowed speech he will trick you and escape."

Don't let him speak, Lieber repeats, citing the prophecy of a medieval Jewish sage: "There shall come upon the earth in the time of night a man surpassing eloquent. All that is God's . . . must have its counterpart, its backside of evil and negation. So it is with the Word, with the gift of speech."

But weakened by disease, near death, and fearing that if they all die, Hitler will never face justice, the team in the jungle decides to disobey Lieber's warning, to put Hitler on trial, to allow him to speak in his own defense.

That speech, Hitler's own Hitler explanation, constitutes almost all of the final section of the novel. He speaks, this Hitler, with all the feverishly insidious fluency that Lieber had warned against, speaks with a force and a slippery fluidity that a summary can't convey, but the overriding theme is that whatever he was, whatever he became, he learned from the Jews—they, not he, are to blame for what he became and did.

It's a theme that expresses itself in three variations. First, he insists he learned his racism, his notion of the Master Race, from the Jewish idea of the Chosen People. He even points the finger at a specific Jew, a fellow flophouse denizen in Vienna named Jacob Grill who, he claims, read him Chosen People passages from the Bible that he merely adapted by substituting Aryan for Hebrew superiority: "My racism was a parody of yours," he tells his Jewish captors, "a hungry imitation."

Second, he claims that in seeking to exterminate the Jews, he was not

imposing his will upon the world but expressing, carrying out the wishes of the rest of the world—with its willing collaboration. It was not just the Germans but the whole world who wanted to erase the Jews because "the Jew invented conscience and left man a guilty serf," forever tortured by expectations he cannot meet. Expectations Hitler summarizes as the threefold "blackmail of transcendence": the Ten Commandments of Moses, the Sermon on the Mount of Jesus, and the demands for social justice of Karl Marx—three Jews who tormented mankind with the demands of conscience, love, and justice.

"What were our camps compared with *that*?" Hitler asks the jury in the jungle. "Ask of man more than he is, hold before his tired eyes an image of altruism, of compassion, of self-denial which only the saint or the madman can touch, and you stretch him on the rack. Till his soul bursts. What can be crueler than the Jew's addiction to the ideal?" With Moses, Jesus, and Marx, "Three times the Jew has pressed on us the blackmail of transcendence. Three times he has infected our blood and brains with the bacillus of perfection."

Steiner's Hitler denies, then, that he is some "singular demon of your rhetorical fantasies." He is not an aberration: "You have made of me some kind of mad devil, the quintessence of evil, hell embodied." No, he says, he is rather a *culmination* of human wishes: How else "could millions of ordinary men and women have found in me the mirror, the plain mirror of their needs and appetites?" The slaughter could not have happened without their active and passive complicity: "It was . . . an ugly time. But I did not create its ugliness, and I was not the worst." Here, he indulges in an excursion into exculpation through comparative evil, measuring himself against the slaughter of the Congolese by the Belgians (twenty million, he says), against the Boer War inventors of the concentration camp, and finally, against Stalin: "Our terrors were a village carnival compared with his."

Hitler's final argument is that he was, in fact, serving as an instrument of the will of the Jewish God. He was not the destroyer of the Jews but, in fact, their *savior*, because his war on them made possible the fulfillment of the messianic dream of the return to Israel. In fact, his most outrageous claim is that he, Hitler, might in fact *be* the promised Messiah.

Finally, Hitler gives his summation. "Gentlemen of the tribunal: I took my doctrines from you. I fought the blackmail of the ideal with which you have hounded mankind. My crimes were matched and surpassed by those of others. The *Reich* begat Israel. These are my last words."

His last words: Part of the problem with this astonishing speech—and I should stress it's only one cause of the rage with which many reacted to it—is that these are not only Hitler's last words but virtually the last words in the entire novel.

There is one final full paragraph appended in which a rain-forest tribesman who has been a silent witness to the trial of Hitler leaps up, intending "to cry out. 'Proved!'" The tribesman had not understood the words Hitler spoke. Steiner writes, but their "brazen pulse carried all before it." In fact, the tribesman's cry never escapes from his mouth, so the last *sounded* word is in fact Hitler's. But assuming the tribesman did utter it, there's an ambiguity here: What is "proved," Hitler's case for himself or the case against him? In any event, Hitler's speech is followed not by any refutation, just the sound of helicopters descending on the clearing in which the trial has taken place. Are the helicopters there, as has been hinted, to silence Hitler, to execute him before he can become a terrible inconvenience to the former Allies by reminding them of their complicity in his rise, their complacency despite their knowledge of the death-camp slaughter? Or have they come to convey Hitler back where his dangerously insidious words, his antimatter language, will once again have the power to seduce and destroy? The novel ends in mid-sentence with the helicopters descending. The only thing clear is that with the conclusion of the novel, the trial of Adolf Hitler had ended—and the trial of George Steiner had begun.

The charges against Steiner were manifold and stinging, ranging from the artistic to the personal: First, it was said he'd allowed Hitler to have the last word. That long, insidious, subversive, and disturbing speech at the end of the novel is allowed to go unrefuted. While some of Steiner's defenders twisted themselves into exegetical knots trying to prove that the Hitler speech, like the speech of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, subverted, refuted *itself*—self-deconstructed, pulled the rug out from under its own rhetoric, if you looked closely at it—their efforts in this direction were undermined by Steiner's enigmatic silence on where *he* stood in regard to the Hitler speech. In fact, before speaking with him, I hadn't been able to find any published instance in which he made explicit his actual attitude toward the words he put in Hitler's mouth, much less adopted that defense.

Despite the attacks on him and his work, which escalated into public picketing when the novel became a stage play, he would not use the defense of irony, that he'd intended Hitler's speech to be self-subverting. And to some, even if he had, it wouldn't have been enough. To give Hitler even a semblance of cogency, of sophistication, was "playing with fire," as Steiner's most penetrating critic, Hyam Maccoby, put it: In a world historically receptive to any anti-Semitic argument, however crude, to put in Hitler's mouth a powerful rationale for blaming the Jews, however ironically intended, was feeding the same fires that sent Jews up the chimneys of the death camps.

The sharpest attacks of all insinuated that Steiner was not merely putting words in Hitler's mouth but making Hitler his mouthpiece—that Steiner's

Hitler was saying things about the Jews that Steiner himself believed. For a time after the publication of the book, this argument was carried on in small intellectual publications and Jewish journals. But when Steiner permitted the novel to be staged, when the actor Alec McCowen gave full-blooded persuasive voice to Steiner's Hitler's words, when audiences seemed to some to applaud Hitler and Jewish pickets chanted outside the theater, it became a public nightmare for Steiner. A Frankenstein nightmare: Some part of him clearly wondered whether he had in fact given birth anew to a posthumous Hitler that would haunt him, haunt Jews forever after—giving Hitler not just a posthumous victory but a posthumous life. Some part of him must have feared that the fantasy in the novel—a Hitler who had escaped—had come true, although Hitler hadn't escaped until Steiner freed him, gave him voice again. A perverse fulfillment of the warning of one of his characters: "If he is allowed speech he will trick you and escape."

I could sense Steiner's deep unease over the issue in his anguished denial that the audience at the London production had applauded Hitler and not his play. His quintuple "no, no, no, no, no."

And yet I found to my surprise he was willing to answer my questions about his Hitler quite frankly, more revealingly I believe than he ever had before. I put the question very directly: Can't the unanswered Hitler speech, the novel itself, be interpreted as blaming the Jews for Hitler's crimes against them?

At first, he seemed to be distancing himself from that possibility with the it's-only-a-character-speaking ploy. "It can be interpreted that Hitler would have defended himself this way. . . . Suppose he hadn't shot himself. He's put in a glass box. And suppose his demonic power *had* been unleashed?"

In other words, Steiner was merely trying to extrapolate the reality of Hitler rather than put his own persuasive words into his mouth or endorse those words in any way. His use of the word "demonic" suggested to me that he might, in fact, be deploying the "Milton's Satan" defense of his Hitler speech. William Blake had argued provocatively that the dazzling heroic rhetoric Milton puts in Satan's mouth in Book I of *Paradise Lost* (when a speech by Lucifer rallies his fellow fallen angels with romantic rhetoric of rebellion against tyranny) proved that Milton himself was "of the Devil's party." But the thrust of the twentieth-century critical response to Satan's speech was to attempt to prove that Milton had ingeniously devised Satan's rhetoric in such a way that, examined closely, it betrayed its own diabolical meretriciousness: that the reader was designed to first be seduced, to be "surprised by sin" (the title of an excellent early study of the question by Stanley Fish), only then to realize how the glittering surface of Satan's rhetoric had ensnared him. And—shocked by the nearness of his own fall—to emerge chastened and ever more alert to the danger of taking at face value the words of the Devil.

But when I gave Steiner the opportunity to avail himself of this defense, he refused the easy way out. The questions Hitler raises in his speech are *valid*, he told me. "I think it calls for answers," he said. "Hitler's speech calls for answers," he repeats. And he means answers from Jews.

Consider the argument he puts in his Hitler's mouth that the Jewish concept of the Chosen People is the origin of the Master Race idea. Steiner defends the comparison: "The thousand-year reich, the nonmixing of races, it's all, if you want, a hideous travesty of the Judaic. But a travesty can only exist because of that which it imitates."

Almost refusing to hear Steiner's endorsement of the comparison, I kept offering him a way out from behind his Hitler.

"When Hitler calls himself Sabbatai," I began, referring to a passage in Steiner's Hitler's speech in which he invokes the name of the famous false messiah who deceived masses of Jews worldwide before recanting and converting to Islam. "I thought that was an indication of—I was looking for irony in your view of Hitler."

"There is irony!" Steiner says. "Because of the Sabbatai Zvi figure then converting, and there's mockery there." But it's localized irony. He insists the questions his Hitler asks about the implication of the Jews in their fate must be taken seriously. "I have demanded an answer [to these questions] and never got one" from his critics who condemned him for even asking. He insists on his right to ask—and on the need to answer—Hitler's questions.

Hitler's questions or Steiner's questions? Perhaps the most revealing thing Steiner said came when he reiterated to me the need for answers: "I don't think I even know how to answer what I say in that last speech," he told me. It wasn't until reading over the transcript of the interview that I realized I'd missed the import of that quote: "I don't . . . know how to answer what I say in that last speech." Not what Hitler says, what I, George Steiner, say. His Hitler speaks for him. He stands behind his Hitler's questions: "There were many attacks on that speech," he says, but they attacked the very notion of raising the questions rather than answering them.

"And I *want* it to be answered," he insists, raising his voice. "Where is the answer? Not just saying you're being an outrageous cretin for asserting such things. I'm still waiting for answers. I've debated its role often, including with Fackenheim. And no answers. He needed to malign me, that I totally misunderstood the sense of God's election [of the Chosen People]. And I then began quoting the book of Joshua and said to Fackenheim, 'You really don't get it. I *really* want an answer.'"

Struck by how impassioned he was, I asked him about the final, most outrageous question his Hitler asks: Wasn't *he*—Hitler—the Messiah who brought about the fulfillment of the messianic dream of a Jewish homeland in Palestine?

"We can show that the miracle of the recognition of Israel in 1948 is inseparable from the Shoah," Steiner replied. "so my Hitler says, 'Who created Israel? There wouldn't have been an Israel without the Shoah.'"

I tried to get a sense of just how closely Steiner stands behind another assertion of his Hitler: that he was only embodying the animus of the world against the Jews, exterminating the Jews for the "blackmail of transcendence," for torturing non-Jews with the invention of, the demands of conscience.

"It seems pejorative, the phrase you use," I said, "calling it 'the blackmail of transcendence.' Is there something wrong with asking people to be better than themselves?"

"No," he says. "But they hate you for it. We hate no one as deeply as somebody who says we've got to do better and keeps saying it and rubbing it in, just rubbing our nose in our own failing. Oh boy! Who do we hate most? Those who have been generous to us in a moment of weakness, those who have seen us in abject need? And when we end up doing well, we will do anything not to look them in the eye again."

It's hard to deny that this is a truth of human nature, that, as the saying goes, no good deed goes unpunished. But is Steiner endorsing the view that the Jews deserve to be punished for asking (in the persons of Moses, Jesus, and Marx) for an ethic of good deeds? "Is transcendence something Jews should be apologetic for?" I asked Steiner.

"On the contrary," he said. "It's the highest—My *God*, if we could be—if we could love our neighbors as ourselves, oh boy."

"But aren't you saying the inevitable product of positing this as an ideal is Hitler?"

"Not just positing it," Steiner replied. "The Jews were demanding it and demanding it," he said, once again sounding as if the Jews *were* to blame.

"Should we have demanded less or—"

He sighed. "Probably we should have done better by demanding it more of *ourselves*. Now if Mother Teresa were sitting here, I'd shut up. She has the right to demand it. I've known human beings—very few—who have given up high careers to work on the Afghan border in the refugee camps, right. Or people in geriatric wards in New York, emptying the shit bowls at night, holding people shouting and shaking with drugs. *These* people have every right to say to me, 'Why don't you do something more with your life?' In fact, they don't. The other ones that don't [live those lives] do [demand] it. And until you know that you can do far better, it is very difficult to ask it of others. And Judaism has asked it of others three times."

Again, while Steiner insists these are questions he wants answers to, the way he frames the questions seems to suggest he *knows* the answers. Not that he likes the answers, but the answers do seem, if not to blame the Jews, then to implicate them in their fate. Here he seems to be saying that it's

not so much the Jews' fault for demanding transcendence but rather for the implicit hypocrisy of demanding it from others without first sufficiently demonstrating it themselves. Jews don't always live up to the standards they set for everyone, therefore, supposedly, we can *understand* why the world secretly approved when Hitler slaughtered them.

Because of my admiration for Steiner's intellect and his art, I was reluctant to come around to his critics' view that he was, in his Hitler novel, devising sophisticated ways of blaming the victim. But, in fact, in my conversation with him at Cambridge that morning, he took a breathtaking leap even beyond the blame-the-victim rhetoric of his Hitler novel. He tossed out, almost casually, what might be seen as the ultimate blame-the-victim argument: the Jews' *ontological* responsibility for Hitler's crime.

It was a line of speculation so shocking, so transgressive, I later found myself wishing I hadn't heard it at all. He introduced it by referring to a startling remark in the final, posthumously published interview with Sidney Hook, the celebrated anticommunist philosopher—a remark Hook realized was so inflammatory he insisted it could not be published during his lifetime.

"It had a tremendous impact on me," Steiner tells me. "Dying, Sidney Hook gave [Norman] Podhoretz an interview. And he believed great philosophers should not be afraid to speak out, but he demanded it be kept posthumous. It says something very important. It says something roughly like this: If we [the Jews] had disappeared, assimilated, wouldn't it have been much better? Hasn't the price been too great? Now, this is a key question. And Hook was afraid to touch on that taboo until after his death, but it's there. He dictates it to Podhoretz."

It's controversial enough, but, Steiner says, "My question goes even further. I have said Auschwitz does two things: It does everything to the Jew, and it does everything to those who *do* it to the Jews." And then he delivers the unspeakable implication: "The horror of the thing is we have lowered the threshold of mankind."

"We as Jews have? By—?"

"By being the occasion of mankind's ultimate bestiality," he said. "We are that which has shown mankind to be ultimately bestial. We refused Jesus, who dies hideously on the cross. And then mankind turns on us in a vulgar kind of counter-Golgotha which is Auschwitz. And when somebody tortures a child, he does it to the child, he does it to himself, too."

"Well, true, but who are we to sympathize with—both equally?"

Steiner presses on with his extraordinary argument about Jews lowering the threshold of mankind: "Auschwitz breaks the reinsurance on human hope in a sense."

"Breaks the reinsurance on human hope?" I asked. "The sense that there is always some kind of safety net, some reason not to give in to utter despair at the evil in the world?"

"Yeah. And without us, there wouldn't have been Auschwitz. In a sense, an obscene statement and yet an accurate statement."

Again, I found myself not quite willing to believe that Steiner believed in the implications of what he was saying: It went beyond blaming the victim for giving the perpetrator an excuse, a "reason" that explained his crime against them; it blamed the victim for even *existing* in the first place and thus becoming an "occasion" for the perpetrator sinking to new levels of depravity or inventing new degrees of evil.

And so I questioned him closely about this conjecture. What was it about Auschwitz in the first place that defined it as a quantum leap in the evolution of evil, made it different from previous massacres, in the sense that this one "breaks the reinsurance on human hope"?

What made it different, he says, is its "terrible ontological comprehensiveness. There have been many other horrible massacres," he says. "And men are cruel, and they've tortured." But the ontological difference, the new, darker mode of being that came into being with Auschwitz, has to do with the ontological reason the Jews were killed: not because of their actions but because of their being.

"To kill a child because he *is*, not because he does, not because he believes, not because he belongs [to a religion]. For his being. That's what the word 'ontological' means. Because you *are*, you must die. This is not like other pursuits. If you kill a lot of Serbs, it's because you want their territory, et cetera, et cetera. Islam converts Jews, doesn't kill them. The idea that the Jew has to be eliminated because he *is*, that his existential being is inadmissible—the attempt to fulfill *that* idea probably means that humanity has no road back to certain illusions."

"No road back": What he's saying has something in common with his speculation on Kafka as the cause of the death camps: By bringing into the world the previously unthinkable *idea* of such sophisticated bestiality, Kafka might somehow have caused it. Similarly by being the victim of such previously unimaginable bestiality, the Jews may have "caused" the bottom to drop out of the world, an unmendable rent in the tenuous fabric of hope suspended over the bottomless abyss of despair.

Which is why Steiner invokes Sidney Hook's despairing posthumous question: Might the world have been better off if the Jews had stopped being Jews? Hook asks. Might the world have been better off if the Jews had never existed at all? Steiner asks.

Steiner calls this line of speculation obscene yet accurate. It's certainly obscene: is it accurate? For one thing, Hook's conjecture is belied by the fact that conversion or assimilation rarely spared Jews the ravages of anti-Semitism. Recently, Benzion Netanyahu demonstrated that in the Spanish Inquisition hatred and murder of the Jews persisted regardless of their conversion to Christianity:

It was *racial* rather than religious (in fact, especially targeted at the converts and Marranos): so, of course, was Hitler's.

In another sense, Steiner's ontological blame-the-Jews argument contradicts the gravamen of what he—or his Hitler—argues in that notorious speech in the novel. To Steiner's Hitler, Jews weren't exterminated just for "being" but for "cause"—for the torments of conscience they supposedly inflicted on the world, for instance.

Just to clarify this point, I asked Steiner about his argument that the Jews were killed because they tortured the conscience of mankind.

"You seem to be saying that something about the Jews—that this is a *rational* hatred—"

"No—it is—*no*. Call it, if you want, an intuitive [hatred]—I believe that explanations for anti-Semitism of a sociopolitical nature are fine as far as they go, but they tell you nothing about two things. About Jew-hatred where there are no Jews [in contemporary Poland, for instance] and about the ontological decision that one must kill the human person because of its being. And hence I put forward this image, this hypothesis that our invention of God, of Jesus, our invention of Marxist utopia, has left humanity so uncertain inwardly that it is trying to banish its own bad conscience."

"Are you saying, then, that the torture of conscience is worse than the torture in the camps even?"

"Over the long run," he says, "to feel yourself at fault probably builds up unbearable hatreds, *self-hatreds*. To feel yourself found out."

Of course, there are those who believe that what is really going on here is Steiner's self-hatred, Steiner as a self-hating Jew. But I don't think so. I found Steiner deeply identified as a Jew, not anti-Zionist, as he's occasionally been portrayed—in fact, anti-anti-Zionist. But he has even more deeply identified with the Jew as the perennial outsider, with the alienating, self-lacerating, self-awareness of Jewish intellect, making the Jew so often an exile not just from a physical homeland but from metaphysical comfort in the world. He spoke in fact of his fondness for the figure of the Wandering Jew, and for Jewish wanderers and wonderers from Spinoza to Kafka and Trotsky.

But I still found it disturbing how far he was willing to wander into speculation that seemed to make Jews responsible for the ontologic scale, the ontology-shifting-and-darkening crimes against them. Unless, perhaps, there was in Steiner a willful need to place himself and his people at the ontological center of the universe. It's almost a Steinerian reinvention of the Chosen People doctrine he professes to question: the fate of the Jews as the fulcrum, the test case of Being.

But something else seemed to be going on, something more disturbing, something that may confirm Steiner's distrust of the Word, of the uncanny

power of Hitler's voice. In attempting a daring act of literary ventriloquism, in attempting to speak *with* Hitler's voice, to make him mouth Steiner's own ideas (about the blackmail of transcendence, and so on), a frightening inversion seems to have taken place, one that calls into question who is really pulling the strings—who is the ventriloquist, who the marionette. An inversion that finds a Jewish intellectual talking about the world being better off had the Jews never existed—arriving at the same place, by however different a route, that Hitler did. Another case of the subtle working of the Hitler spell?

Still, as the formal interview came to a close, I couldn't help being impressed by Steiner's candor, by his willingness to take personal responsibility for ideas and questions he'd put in Hitler's mouth fifteen years previously, by his courage, or recklessness, in venturing beyond them to even more incendiary territory. While raising the notion of his Hitler as a frightening creation who'd escaped him, he ultimately was standing squarely behind his Hitler, odd as it sounds to say it.

Walking back to the porter's lodge of Churchill College, Cambridge, Steiner and I returned to the subject of the historical Hitler—in particular, his fabled charisma.

"I used to ask my students," Steiner said, "If Hitler walked into a room, would you get up?"

"'Would they get up' meaning—"

"Would one sit in the presence of world history?"

"And you feel that the presence would be so commanding—but didn't Beryl Bainbridge make him seem to be essentially just a slight, unimpressive figure?" I was referring to Bainbridge's challenging novel, *Young Adolf*, which postulates an apocryphal young Hitler visiting his half brother Alois Jr. in Liverpool in 1911, during the "lost years" when he was twenty-two. Bainbridge's brilliantly understated premise in limning a lazy, layabout slacker Hitler is to raise the question of the unbridgeable abyss between the youthful, inconsequential Hitler and the evil god he became. It raises the eternal question of the source of his metamorphosis: When and how did he acquire his demonic charisma?

"But you feel that had the young Adolf walked into the room, one would have immediately *known*?" I asked him.

"Many did," he says. "Many did. Speer fell in love with him and never gave up that love." (It's interesting how often Speer's love for Hitler is cited as impressive by sophisticated Hitler commentators such as Trevor-Roper and Steiner. It's as if to say, If someone as sophisticated as I am could fall under the Hitler spell, then he really *must* have had something.)

"Wasn't Speer falling in love with the later, charismatic Hitler, though?" I asked.

"Goebbels meets him very early, very early. And writes in his diary. 'Is he John the Baptist? Is he Jesus?'"

"Yes, but that was still about 1925," I said. "We still have him just the unimpressive corporal in the First World War."

"He's not!" Steiner exclaims. "He has the Iron Cross twice over. Three times wounded! Oh boy! In the most dangerous of all military functions—namely, courier. Where the survival rate was about a week, usually like one *hour*. Later on, he's a spotter, an artillery spotter in front of the lines. And he *volunteered* for this. And his contempt later for general staff officers who haven't been in a fighting war was fully justified. He *knew*, he *knew*."

"So Hitler was a genuinely brave man?"

"Immensely. You do not get three major wounds and the Iron Cross unless you are."

"So we can't get off the hook by thinking of him as cowardly, as hypocritical about—"

"Oh no."

"He was heroic and admirable in a way? Up to that point?"

"Well, his record is objectively there for anybody to see. And it's [his military courage] very important for the later politics."

I took my leave with mixed feelings. It was similarly hard to doubt Steiner's personal courage in asking explosive questions—and giving incendiary answers to them—in venturing beyond the lines of conventional thinking on the subject. Speculations that make *him* vulnerable to hostile fire.

And he has been fired upon. His most thoughtful and thoroughgoing critic, Hyam Maccoby, once said of Steiner and the words he put in Hitler's mouth: "He knew he was playing with fire."

The implication is that Steiner was being intellectually immature, a child playing with matches; that he was giving in to the seductions of his own brilliance—to the impulse to play with ideas, to push speculations to the limits without caring enough for the consequences in the hands of those less well intentioned in a world dangerous to Jews. An impulse to play that might not be dangerous in one who lacked Steiner's powerful intellect, but is in him. That, in effect, Steiner is too smart, but not wise enough, for his own good. Or ours.

But Maccoby himself—as we'll see in the next chapter—is also not averse to "playing with fire."

CHAPTER 18

Singling out Christianity: The Passion Play of Hyam Maccoby

*In which a Jewish scholar offers the explanation
that dare not speak its name*

It's the beginning of holiday season in London; the crowds bustling through the bracing December chill are exhibiting the conventional Dickensian cheer, bearing festive rolls of wrapping paper and ribbon home. But deep in the basement of the Sternberg Library of the Leo Baeck Institute for Jewish Studies, the combative scholar Hyam Maccoby was exhibiting a very different kind of holiday spirit.

"People go on about this jolly festival of Christmas," he was saying to me. "But I think Christmas is a *sinister* festival."

Sinister?

"Because what is it? The sacrifice has been born. Let us rejoice. The Christian doesn't think about Easter now, but somewhere in the back of his mind, Christmas is leading him to Easter. In the back of everybody's mind is, Why are we celebrating this birth with such joy? We are garlanding the sacrifice. Because he's due for a horrific death." A horrific death the Jews will pay for, have paid for. To Maccoby, the dark truth beneath the cheer, the skull beneath the skin of the holiday spirit, is the responsibility Christianity, even Christmas, bears for the horrific death of the Jews.