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“Shall We Talk About Light?”: Fate and Freedom in Harry Mulisch’s *The Assault*

Graham N. Forst

Night enshrouds the literature of the Holocaust, reminding us that the Nazi code name for the Endlösung, the Final Solution, was *Nacht und Nebel*, Night and Fog. The lemur-like existence of Anne Frank and her family as described in the well-known diaries immediately comes to mind here, but readers of Holocaust literature also know how the hated pre-dawn *Appells* haunt the memoirs of camp survivors, as do the small-hour arrests by the Gestapo during ghettoization in Europe. Night also cloaks the flights of literary fugitives from the Nazis, such as the child protagonists in Kosinski’s *Painted Bird*, Wiesel’s *Forest of the Night*, Appelfeld’s *Tzili* and Schwartz-Bart’s *Last of the Just*. It conceals the acts of the *Einsatzgruppen* in Thomas’ *White Hotel* and abets the exploits of the underground, as in Hersey’s *The Wall*. As well, night provides the setting of the most famous and haunting passages in all Holocaust literature—this, from Elie Wiesel’s *Night*:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. . . . Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never. (43)

The universality of night imagery in Holocaust literature is not in itself remarkable. Night is a natural metaphor for secrecy and perhaps also for the eclipse of hope, and even, as it clearly is for Wiesel and others, for the end of the period of liberal humanism known as the *Erklärung* which began in eighteenth-century Europe —the Enlightenment.

Thus, it’s hardly surprising that the violent opening scenes of Harry Mulisch’s much-praised 1982 novel *De Aanslag*¹ (published in English in 1985 as *The Assault*), are set in the darkness of a winter night in German-occupied Holland, 1945. But the strength of Mulisch’s novel is not in its depiction of war-based atrocities or traumas. In fact, the assault of the title and its immediate impact on the life of the novel’s protagonist—the twelve-year-old Anton Steenwijk—take up only the first of four chapters of the novel. Clearly, Mulisch wants to focus on much larger (or at least much different) issues than do Wiesel or Appelfeld or Kosinski: for Mulisch, the rationale for focusing on Nazi brutality is not remembering per se, but rather learning how to meet the challenge of history; learning how now, forty years later, we can protect ourselves from the recurrence of Fascism. Thus, *The Assault* opens at

midnight and closes at midday, a symbolic sequence that drives home the author's clear conviction, that it is still possible and indeed necessary for man (and by extrapolation, for modern Europe) through acts of personal courage, and a willingness to conduct an unremitting and honest examination of history and accept its implications and lessons, to "enlighten" himself personally and socially. In fact, Mulisch clearly sees such a willingness as the *only* hope man has of escaping the cruel grip of historical necessity.

The plot of *The Assault* centres on the events (partly historical) which follow the assassination of a high-ranking Dutch Nazi, Fake Ploeg, by members of the Dutch underground just before the liberation of Holland in 1945 by Canadian armed forces. The shooting occurs in front of the home of the Steenwijks' next-door neighbours, the Kortewegs: the teenage Karin and her widower-father. Fearing Gestapo reprisals, the Kortewegs, apparently to save their own skins (but in fact to save the father's pet lizards!), drag the corpse next door in front of the Steenwijks' house, an ostensibly unaccountable decision, given that the neighbours to the other side of the Kortewegs—the Aartses—had no family. In the violence which ensues when the Gestapo arrives, the Steenwijk family is liquidated—all except the youngest son, Anton, who is subsequently thrown into jail. There he shares a cell with Truus Coster, a woman who (as he finds out much later) was a member of the very underground cell responsible for the shooting of the detested Ploeg.

The events of his evening hours spent in the jail cell are profoundly sealed in the boy's consciousness by this meeting, one which is fraught with erotic overtones and given an archetypal rites-of-passage dimension when the wounded girl accidentally smears her blood across Anton's face.

Shortly afterwards, Coster dies. But Anton survives, and the novel follows approximately the next forty years of his life, most of which he spends trying to bury his past. His efforts, however, prove fruitless, as the "assault" continues to haunt him, due primarily to chance meetings with characters involved in that night of violence in the winter of 1945. Each of these chance meetings provides Anton with information which forces him to confront his trauma.

There are three such chance encounters: eleven years after the war, the son of the assassinated Nazi, Fake Ploeg Jr., takes shelter co-incidentally in the alcove of Anton's house during a violent anti-Communist street demonstration. And it is from the younger Ploeg that Anton discovers exactly who killed his (Ploeg's) Nazi father. Then, fourteen years later, Anton, no less co-incidentally, finds himself sitting in a restaurant beside Ploeg's assassin himself, Cor Takes, from whom he learns the identity of the girl with whom he shared the jail cell in 1945; and finally, yet fifteen years later, he bumps into his war-time neighbour Karin Korteweg at an anti-war rally. From her, he finally discovers the reason why she and her father moved the corpse of the assassinated Nazi down the street to the Steenwijks' house rather than *up* to that of the childless Aartses. When he hears the answer, i.e., that the Aartses were hiding a family of Jews—Anton cries out "Christ!", and in a kind of

ecstasy he merges into the “endless streams of human life” flowing around him (183–84), until he is (symbolically) reconciled with his son, Peter, who had been lost in the crowd.

Anton’s awakening is significant, because the night of horror which had traumatized the child had threatened to anaesthetize totally the adult; and indeed, his chosen specialty in medical school had been anaesthesiology, a profession he chose because, in his own words, it allowed him “to close the hospital doors behind him after an operation was finished” (80)—that is, of course, metaphorically speaking, to bury his past. Thus, during the liberation of Holland, Anton remained uninvolved rather than become what he called (quite ironically) “part of the heavenly kingdom that had come down to earth” (55). And later, he would consistently refuse to participate in the politics of post-war Holland: “I’ve had my share,” or “I don’t go in for that sort of thing” he answers when invited to do so (61, 163). Similarly, when, during a vacation in 1966 to London he visits Westminster Abbey, he finds himself envying the dead in the sarcophagi, “on their backs . . . permanently anaesthetized” (98). In short, he had become a man who “simply let things happen to him” (97).

But if Mulisch is not in *The Assault* attempting to replicate the archetype of the damaged Holocaust child-victim, neither is he interested in recreating the archetype of the modern absurdist hero, such as Hemingway’s Jake Barnes or Camus’ Meursault, nor in creating yet another war-traumatized anti-hero, such as Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim or Heller’s Yossarian. Anton Steenwijk is a quester and even to some extent a visionary, a point Mulisch makes quite clear from the type of imagery with which he connects him throughout the novel. For example, at the very beginning of the first chapter, Anton is associated with imagery of *flight*: he keeps cards which help him identify all the aircraft that pass overhead; he wants so badly to become a pilot that his Nazi captors refer to him as *Herr Fliegergeneral* [Air Marshall] (46). A similar type of imagery identifies Anton many times throughout the novel as a stargazer (he’s particularly interested in the blind hunter Orion, who, like Anton in later life, regains his “sight” by staring at the rising sun) and as fascinated by sextants and telescopes (18, 97). Indeed, at one point in the novel, his captors refer to him as “Phoebus Apollo, the god of light and beauty” (45), a line of imagery which connects him later to the Egyptian Sun God, Ra (177, 184). Elsewhere, we are told that his favourite colour is green, his favourite film Bergman’s idealistic vision of ascendent humanity *The Seventh Seal*; and that his favourite piece of music is Mahler’s second symphony, *The Resurrection* (15, 83).

But it is not only the *imagery* of flight, light, and growth associated with Anton Steenwijk that sets the novel apart from absurdist traditions and its protagonist from the anti-hero archetype—it is also the pattern of Anton’s courage and foresight which determine the strength of his character in our minds. This pattern is established in the first chronological glimpse we have of Anton when, in a tense moment at school, there was a stand-off between, on the one hand, Fake Ploeg Jr., who had sat down in class in his Hitler Youth uniform and, on the other,

his math teacher, who bars the door to the other students, refusing to teach while anyone wearing the detested powder-blue uniform disgraced his classroom. Anton, however, realizes the collaborator's son had no choice, having been put up to this by "that father of his," so in pity he dives under the math teacher's arm and sits down at his desk. Later, after the others have quickly followed him, Anton is informed by the principal that his action "had probably saved [the teacher's] life" (18).

In a similar vein, when the Gestapo is about to invade the Steenwijks' house after the assassination of Ploeg, Anton is the only one to take direct *action* to try to save his brother Peter's life when the latter tries to go out into the night to dispose of the assassinated Nazi's corpse: specifically, Anton grabs the house keys and throws them away in a (fruitless) attempt to prevent Peter from enacting his plan. And much later, in his fifties, when Anton is given a prescription for tranquilizers to prevent his migraine headaches from recurring, he "tore it up at once," in a defiant assertion of his will to conquer his own demons, unaided (151).

But given the nature and origin of Anton's traumas, clearly his most "heroic" dimension derives from his gradually developed and courageous willingness to examine his own history, and he is in fact the only character in the novel who is able or willing to do so. The guilt-ridden elder Korteweg, for example, runs away to New Zealand after the war, and later commits suicide. His daughter, unable to continue her nursing career, is living on public assistance when we meet her at the end of the novel. Cor Takes becomes an alcoholic, and Fake Ploeg Jr. a neo-Nazi, the type of person whom historians of the Holocaust will later call a "revisionist."

The younger Ploeg, in fact, develops as the polar opposite of Anton. Described as "the image of [Ploeg's] father" (86), Fake Ploeg Jr. insists to Anton that his father, who was shot in post-war reprisals, was as "innocent" as Anton's own parents—on the grounds that protecting the world from Communism was as noble an act as protecting it from Fascism or Nazism. And more: the Communists were, as Ploeg insists in his twisted logic, actually *responsible* for Anton's parents' death as they *knew* the assassination of Ploeg would generate reprisals. Ploeg does grant that the extermination of European Jewry loads the moral issue in favour of the Communists as against the Fascists, but insists that "[his father] didn't know a thing about that. . . . He simply did his duty, what he was told" (91). And in any case, he continues,

If Hitler had won the War, how many people in Holland would still be against him now, do you suppose? Don't make me laugh, man. Not till they saw that Hitler was losing did they all suddenly belong to the Resistance, those yellow bastards. (91)

Clearly, Ploeg is a *victim* of history, in the sense that we are always victimized by monsters we create to rationalize our irresolution and fear. As a victim of history, Ploeg cannot love, cannot forgive, and cannot grow; instead, he is caught in its cycles of hatred and revenge—a

person for whom political “revolution” will be true to its literal name: a turning around, a replacing of one hatred with another.

Cor Takes is the other major victim of history in *The Assault*. Of course, he is a more sympathetic character than Ploeg, but like Ploeg, he also cannot escape from history in whose cycles he is entrapped by his wrath. Thus, he remembers proudly his wartime motto: “Fight Fascists with Fascism” (142). And still now, completely unregenerate, he tells Anton proudly how he dismembered captured Nazis and kidnapped and killed their children. Similarly, when an ex-Nazi’s pardon is announced in a newspaper, Takes speaks of tracking him down and “slit[ting] his throat with a pocket-knife, if necessary” (134). Ploeg’s aggressiveness and ignorance are replaced in Takes by nihilism: “The only truth that’s useful is that everyone gets killed by whoever kills them, and by no one else” (113), he avers. And whereas Anton has “succeeded” in putting that night in some perspective, Takes “can’t leave the War alone” (118).

Takes and Ploeg will never escape from the fear and anger in their hearts, so they proceed to falsify history in order to rationalize their true goals: material success on Ploeg’s part, revenge on Takes’. But these are not the only misinterpreters of history in the novel; it is full of them, as is, Mulisch suggests, modern Holland—and this thematic vein in *The Assault* is clearly designed to denounce historical revisionism or (at least) the pitiful historical ignorance of modern Europe. For example, in September 1952, Anton is invited to a birthday party of a war veteran in his birth city of Haarlem whence he has not returned since his abduction by the Germans in 1945. In the conversations he overhears between the war veterans regarding the Korean War, the North Koreans are referred to as “barbarians storming at the gates of Christian civilization. . . . Compared to [the North Koreans], the Fascists were mere boys. . . . Let’s drink to the downfall of Red Fascism” (60).

Anton finds himself becoming physically sick while listening to such distortions. He walks away, but not quickly enough to avoid hearing arguments comparing the Vietnamese Liberation Front to the Nazis, coupled with the absurd observation that “actually it [is] the Americans who . . . should now be compared to the Nazis” (104). And as Anton knows, when people’s memories are short enough to compare the genocidal policies of National Socialism with the (however repressive) economics of American imperialism, there’s no preventing the recurrence of another Holocaust.

But if Europe’s history is becoming increasingly buried in the marketplace, in the cesspools of nationalism and nepotism, and in the tar pits of hate, revenge and materialism, Anton’s memories remain honest and intact. And it is Anton’s memories, and his willingness to confront them, which save him in the end, by teaching him how to organize the chaos of his passions, to give style to his character and to affirm life without resentment. As well, it is his willingness to deal honestly with his past that generates his various “breakthroughs,” which seem to come as a result of chance encounters, but in fact are clearly *results of conscious decisions he makes to put himself in a position to achieve those breakthroughs*.² His kindness to Ploeg, his consenting to attend events

where he knows he will meet war veterans, and most importantly his courage in accepting a private invitation to discuss his past with Cor Takes all show that Anton is *not* a passive character, that he has learned fate can be “helped along” by acts of courage and honesty (180).

Now we understand why, by the end of the novel, Anton is willing to tear up his tranquilizer prescriptions, and why his headaches mysteriously diminish (154). Why he’s willing to risk arousing the voices from the past by naming his son after his lost brother (Peter); why he persists in being suspicious of people he meets called Dolph (i.e. “Adolph”) or Tonny (the first name of the head of the Dutch Nazis [13]). In other words in spite of his envy of the sarcophagi at Westminster Abbey, Anton is in truth *willing* to investigate and learn from his past, and as a result he “rises above” the concept of history-as-fate, history as what “was meant to be,” in Karin Korteweg’s words (173).

Thus, although fate *seems* to play a large part in the novel, clearly the larger issue which emerges is the sense that man is not the product but the producer of history—at least potentially—and that therefore *blame* and *guilt* are, will be, and must always profoundly inform our understanding of history. Even the twelve-year old Anton understood this: when Truus Coster whispered to him that one day the Underground itself would be blamed for his parents’ death, his reply was correct: “But if that’s the case, then . . . then no one’s ever at fault. Then everyone can just do as they please” (33).

Precisely. There *is* fault, because there *is* will; and because there *is* will, there *is* right, and there *is* wrong. And it has taken Anton exactly thirty-six years to return to the spanning idea that history will repeat itself only if people wish it to, and that the kind of roiling, sectarian passions of the people streaming around him now by the novel’s end, at the antiwar rally, carrying signs declaiming that ONLY JESUS CAN BRING REAL PEACE, or DROP THE FIRST BOMB ON WASHINGTON, blind passions which promise nothing more than one form of domination for another, can be transcended by something larger and richer.

What this “something” is, he cannot say, but as the hour reaches noon, Truus Coster’s dying thoughts about love, cast in the dark-light imagery which informs Mulisch’s themes in *The Assault*, seem more and more relevant:

We’ve been talking all the time about the dark; shall we talk about light? . . . A long time ago I wanted to write a poem comparing . . . love to light. . . . I wanted to compare love to the kind of light you sometimes see clinging to trees right after a sunset: the magical sort of light. That’s the light people have inside them when they’re in love with someone. Hate is the darkness, that’s no good.

Thus, Coster concludes, in the end, “[the Fascists] will lose, because they have no light in them” (39).

In the final scene, as Anton holds his son and kisses his warm head, he feels as if the “endless streams of human lives” around him

“were helping him, crossing bridges and canals in front of him and behind him” (184). Suddenly the crowd’s voices rise in a “primal scream of mankind” and Anton, for the first time in the novel, seems at peace.

“He has lived through the War” as they say, one of the last, perhaps, to remember. He has joined it against his will, this demonstration, and there’s an ironical look in his eye, as if he finds the situation amusing. (185)

Anton’s final Erklärung, if it can be called that, is certainly dimly lit: Mulisch is not about to romanticise Anton’s state of mind here, because it would be patently false to do so. True, there is more than a touch of sentimentality in the ending, perhaps reflecting what John Naughton has said generally of Dutch literature, that it characteristically presents a “blend of irony and sentimentality” typical of a culture “trapped at the intersection of three great literatures—French, German and English.”⁴

But Anton’s “release” is more than sentimentality: it is couched in terms which cry for an end to the rampant historical myopia about Europe’s Nazi past, conditions which represent, in words used recently by Helmut Kohl to describe the resurgence of neo-Nazism in Germany, “the extinguishing of the light of history.”⁵ In this sense, Mulisch’s protagonist emerges as a kind of second-generation Everyman, a true child survivor, a living Anne Frank who, physically anyway, escaped the black nets of *Nacht und Nebel*, and whose courage in overcoming his own mental hell is an beacon of hope in the dark night of modern European history.

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NOTES

1. Translated by Claire Nicholas Smith for Pantheon Books (New York). The novel was highly praised by, among many others, John Updike in the *New Yorker* (“Dutchmen and Turks,” Jan. 6 1986: 83–85), and Stephen Spender (“Survivor,” *New York Review of Books*, Dec. 5 1985: 65–67).
2. When Nicholas Spice in his long and largely enthusiastic review of *The Assault* in the *London Review of Books* (Dec. 19 1985: 17–19), calls these chance meetings “staged” and the conversations “stiffened by the duty they perform,” he obviously misses this point.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954) 319–320.
4. “Strange Encounters,” in *The Listener* 11 December 1980: 805.
5. “Kohl Demands End to Neo-Nazism,” *Globe and Mail* [Toronto], Saturday May 25, 1991: A7.