

that Luis Bunuel, to whom this novel is dedicated, might do in one of his movies.

Senor Fuentes, however, doesn't seem to have his heart in the imaginative effort required to make his fourth dimension convincing. Perhaps this trick has to be performed with a camera. Luis Bunuel explores alternative narrative possibilities in *Phantôme de la Liberté*, which is a masterpiece of surrealist humor. In any case, the practitioner of surrealism, like the magician, must be able to wink. While Bunuel is delighted by the comic potential of surrealism, Fuentes takes it all very seriously. His yarning is absolutely in earnest. He elaborately and often elegantly tries to involve us in his ghost story even as he works the wires that makes his ideas jump. Such hocus-pocus would make prime source material for the satirical genius of Bunuel. [WV]

THE PORTAGE TO SAN CRISTOBAL OF A.H.

by George Steiner

(Simon and Schuster; 170 pp.; \$13.50)

Michael Fitzgerald

Any literary critic venturing to write fiction faces real perils. Lying in ambush are rival critics, previously disparaged authors, and a lay readership chary of anything squibbed from the pen of a person of letters. Only intrepid critics embark on a journey so fraught with hazards. Those who do, such as Edmund Wilson or Harold Bloom, generally return to the safer shores of criticism.

It is therefore noteworthy when an eminent critic of international reputation sets out on the high seas of fiction. George Steiner of Churchill College, Cambridge, and of the University of Geneva has launched an astonishing little vessel under the title *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.* The novel astonishes in several ways. First, it adopts as its premise a notion that is seemingly better suited to mass-market paperbacks than to the highbrow efforts of the *littérateur*. The story-line is wonderfully obvious: A team of Nazi-hunters has found Hitler, aged but very much alive, in the hinterlands of the Amazonian jungle and must then transport him to an anxious world,

where the sovereign powers have already begun to jockey for custody. Second, the novel invites us to consider the possibility that Hitler's crimes possess a justification. Small wonder that the book provoked outspoken reaction when it appeared in England.

The audacity of the suggestion that Hitler's ideological program, including the *endgültige Lösung*, was legitimate, doubtless forms part of Steiner's authorial strategy. It is designed to awaken us to historical possibilities slumbering in the bowers of received opinion. Not, I think, to the possibility that genocide is justifiable; rather, to the possibility that the human race is irretrievably lost in history's labyrinth. Lost, because the thread that would lead us out of the maze is the tenuous one spun by human language.

The promises and perils of human discourse have long occupied Steiner. As the principal component and validation of our self-awareness, language articulates our presence. It is also the fabric out of which we weave the world. Or, to ape the formulation of Heidegger (on whom Steiner has contributed a volume to the Modern Masters series), human language is being that has become aware of itself *qua* being.

In the essays collected in *Language and Silence* and in the sustained arguments found in *After Babel*, Steiner explored the consequences of the different uses of language. Included therein is the dark side of human speech, what in *Portage* is called the "grammar of hell."

The notion that language can be adversative to humanity was formulated

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first by the nineteenth-century linguist Humboldt: "[Language]...possesses...an autonomous, external identity and being which does violence to man himself." In *After Babel*, Steiner accorded this insight a singular priority for the understanding of language. Hitler, with his demagogic genius, harnessed the latent violence in German and so mesmerized a *volk*: "Instead of turning away in nauseated disbelief, the German people gave massive echo to the man's bellowing. It bellowed back out of a million throats and smashed-down boots....A language in which one can write a 'Horst Wessel Lied' is ready to give hell a native tongue" ("The Hollow Miracle," *Language and Silence*).

Far from being accidental, such miscarriages of language stem from its nature. Falsification, lying, "saying what is not"—these are cardinal instances of language's real vitality. The great mass of speech events does not fall under the rubric of factuality. Except on the specialized occasions of logically formal, prescriptive, or solemnized utterance, language does not convey logical truths or veridical data at all. For Steiner, untruth is the essence of language. Nietzsche had it right: "The Lie—and not the Truth—is divine!"

Ordinarily the fictive dimension in language is harmlessly spent in subjunctives, conditionals, optatives, and counterfactuals. But the demonic element in language may be conjured at any time, as Hitler demonstrated. In *Portage*, the coordinator of Hitler's pursuers, Lieber, warns his charges by radio transmitter not to let A.H. speak. If he does, they must stop their ears like Odysseus' sailors, for A. H. knows "the sounds of madness and loathing and [can] make them seem music."

Yet Hitler speaks. Realizing that their quarry will be snatched from them when they emerge from the jungle, Lieber's band decides to try A.H. Hitler's apologia, issuing from the last pages of the text, constitutes the centerpiece of the novel.

What precedes it is good page-turning narrative: We return intermittently to the Amazonian wilds from the world's political centers, each time with yet more knowledge of the moral bankruptcy and cynicism of the great powers. In these sections Steiner's prose is brisk, lean, apt. But Hitler has virtually the final say. How does he defend himself?

Steiner's Hitler is well-acquainted

with the German philosophic tradition. His *topoi* are cadged from Nietzsche (principally from *Zur Genealogie der Moral*) and from Kant (the concept of *ungesellige Geselligkeit*, albeit in a somewhat free-wheeling version). Whatever its philosophic forebears, Hitler's defense leaves its listeners stunned. One of them—Teku, the illiterate Indian who has helped them to reach the edge of civilization—cannot understand Hitler's words, "only their meaning." After Hitler's peroration, Teku leaps to his feet and triumphantly cries "Proved." Readers of this novel will not likely be moved to such demonstration, but they may shift uneasily in their chairs as they ponder the logic and logomancy of Hitler's words. [WV]

FICTION FROM PRISON: GATHERING UP THE PAST by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

(Fortress Press; xiv+210 pp.; \$14.95)

Edward J. Curtin, Jr.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a brave man, one of a handful of Germans who actively opposed the Nazis. A Christian minister and pacifist, he freely chose in 1939 to leave a safe haven in the United States and return to Germany to share the fate of his countrymen. Through his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, he was recruited into the underground resistance movement and the plot to assassinate Hitler. Eventually arrested for his involvement in smuggling fourteen Jews into Switzerland, he was executed on April 9, 1945.

Bonhoeffer's posthumous reputation rests not only on his heroic life and death but also on his theological writings on "religionless Christianity" that were penned in prison in the last year of his life and published as *Letters and Papers From Prison*. The present volume was written during his first year of imprisonment and, as the subtitle indicates, focuses on the past; his subsequent theological reflections were directed toward the future. As Clifford Green writes in his introduction to the English-language edition, *Fiction From Prison* and *Letters and Papers From Prison* are companion pieces. Having looked back, it seems Bonhoeffer was able to look forward, even beyond his own death.

Fiction From Prison consists of frag-

ments of a play and novel. As he put it in a letter to his close friend Eberhard Bethge (who together with Renate Bethge has contributed an introduction), they were written "to present afresh middle-class life as we know it in our families, and especially in the light of Christianity." Both pieces are highly autobiographical and, while seriously deficient as artistic creations, they present us with a good picture of Bonhoeffer's social and cultural milieu and offer interesting insights into the man himself.

A paradoxical picture emerges, especially for those who think of Bonhoeffer as a daring theologian writing for "a world come of age." He appears here as a man of the old conservative and authoritarian order, one who glorifies the German middle and upper classes. Freedom and equal rights for the masses are anathema to him; they signify the decay and death of real culture. Marriage, good families, sensible names, unobtrusive wealth, solid furniture of good quality, social respect, discipline, fixed social roles, authority, order, law—these are centrally important. Christoph, the main character in both pieces and clearly the voice of Bonhoeffer, makes the point: "We need a genuine upper class again, but how can we get it?" Later he puts it less tactfully: "And because most people are lazy and cowardly, there have to be masters and servants, yes, I would almost say slaves."

There is obviously a contradiction here between Bonhoeffer's Christianity and his elitism, and though he recognizes it, he holds to what Ruth Zerner, in her good commentary, calls "the culture of law," presenting a picture of middle-class life that stresses order, justice, stability, legality, and lack of sentimentality. And above this patriarchal, authoritarian order reigns a stern Christian God.

The irony, of course, is that Bonhoeffer and other upper-class resisters were among the few brave souls who risked, and often gave, their lives in opposition to Hitler. Though repulsed by the Nazis, "their brand of reform from above," as Zerner puts it, "left little room for democracy in the Western European sense of the term."

The theme of death, which preoccupied Bonhoeffer from an early age, runs throughout these narratives. His brother Walter had been killed in