

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. [▼▼▼]

**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

France in 1918, and his cousin Wolf, Count von Kackreuth, had committed suicide during his military service. Bonhoeffer was constantly concerned with how, if at all, he would face up to death. Even here, however, his elitism holds sway. In the drama, Christoph, who is dying of an ailment contracted in war, says to his father: "But these two kinds of people differ in that the rabble knows only how to live, while the noble know also how to die." Together with this motif of a noble, sacrificial death, these fictions are dominated by a sense of the importance of an ordered, strong, middle-class family life and a "rightly understood" Christianity.

While surely no one could accuse Bonhoeffer of harboring democratic ideals, these aesthetic efforts must be seen as the works of an imprisoned man trying, as he put it, "to live on past memories." And they must be seen as a minor prelude to the intriguing theological musings he wrote in the following year.

Above all, these narratives, though interesting for their insights into the man and his milieu, pale into insignificance in light of his brave actions and noble death. It is, I suspect, for his consistently ethical opposition to barbarism that he will be long remembered. As he said in his poem "Stations on the Road to Freedom": "Not in the flight of fancy, but only in the deed there is freedom." ¶VV¶

AGON: TOWARDS A THEORY OF REVISION

by **Harold Bloom**

(Oxford University Press; 336 pp.; \$19.95)

Richard A. Rand

Agon is a strange piece of work, whose chief virtues are not to be seen on the first or second reading. The common reader, alas, is bound to find it uninformative, repetitious, and baffling. To begin with, it presupposes a thorough knowledge of the current critical scene, and a thorough knowledge of the previous ten or twelve books by Harold Bloom himself. And even the academic specialist who happens to know his Bloom exceedingly well is bound to be baffled by *Agon*, because it exhibits a fierce intellectual struggle that it never

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clearly articulates and clearly never could. The work is true to its name, which does not diminish in any way its seminal importance.

Bloom is famous for challenging the dominant academic view of literary history, which holds that an author simply receives, or borrows, a stock of topics and techniques from the writers preceding him. As Bloom has argued persuasively, the relationship between a writer and his precursor is anything but simple; it is, instead, dynamic and conflictual, an affair of "revision" and "misreading." And Bloom is also famous for taking his argument one step further, claiming that the conflictual process is not confined merely to poets and novelists, but extends to the literary critic himself, who struggles to revise what he reads in the light of his own sense of things. Bloom rejects, on principle, any concept of critical objectivity; and if we ask who the precursor critic may be that Harold Bloom himself is struggling against, the answer manifestly would be the "objective" New Critic of thirty years ago, whether T. S. Eliot, William Wimsatt, Jr., or, as Bloom puts it rather scornfully here, the "well-wrought Cleanth Brooks."

Since none of these points is especially new and since much of *Agon* seems to repeat the same points, a sympathetic and informed reader may be tempted to pass it over as an obsessive rehashing of old issues. And that would be a mistake; for something has happened to Bloom that sets this book apart from all his others. The evidence for this can be found, first of all, in the tone of his prose, which at times is flat, abstracted, and monotonous and at other times aggressive and even exasperated. Evidence can also be found in a new, and quite uncharacteristic, cultural chauvinism: Where Bloom has hitherto stressed the links between British, American, and Continental authors, he is now insisting, and quite peremptorily, upon the uniqueness of things American. Over two-thirds of the book is devoted to Americans—to Emerson, Whitman, Stevens, Hart Crane, John Ashbery, and John Hollander. The final chapter, entitled "Coda: the American Difference in Poetry and Criticism," reads like the embattled plea of a besieged patriot: "I myself urge an antithetical criticism in the American grain.... The result is a mixed discourse, vatic perhaps, and at once