Identity Politics and the Jewish Body in Edgar Hilsenrath’s “The Nazi and the Barber”*

By Verena Hutter

This paper examines the role of physical transgressions in Edgar Hilsenrath's postwar Holocaust satire The Nazi and the Barber. The story of the former SS-mass murderer Max Schulz, who impersonates his childhood friend Itzig Finkelstein in order to emigrate to Israel and become a Zionist freedom fighter, is generally read as a satire of German postwar philosemitism. My reading focuses on bodily processes in the novel, from Max's physical metamorphosis to Itzig Finkelstein and his future identity confusions. I argue that Max's physical changes and transgressions underscore the religious-ethical transgressions that scholars, such as Erin McGlothlin, have established. I also submit that Edgar Hilsenrath's description of bodily changes underscores the genre of satire and questions it at the same time—a satire requires an ideal world as a foil against which it is criticized, and ideally inspires hope, yet in Hilsenrath's dark post-Holocaust world neither exists. While most memoirs of Holocaust survivors celebrate survival and aim to stand as a warning to future generations (of 'never again'), Hilsenrath's novel cynically portrays a world in which lies, hatred, and violence are blissfully perpetuated. He presents a unique voice within the representation of the Holocaust.

From the silence of the 1950s to the “Historians’ debate’ of the 1980s, to Martin Walser's controversial 1998 speech on the supposed instrumentalization of German guilt, German postwar discourse on the Holocaust and its remembrance has not exactly covered itself with glory.

The postwar experiences of many concentration camp survivors bespeak of hypocrisy, resentment and relativism, from Jean Améry to Ruth Klüger. Similarly, Edgar Hilsenrath, survivor of the Transnistrian ghetto Moghilev-Podolsk, felt that the German postwar attitude towards the Holocaust was fraught with both hypocrisy and lies. Escaping Russian soldiers in 1945, Hilsenrath returned to the Romanian town of Siret in search of his family. Upon finding the city in ruins, he travelled to Palestine and later emigrated to the United States, where he wrote Der Nazi und der Friseur. Even though written in German in the 1950s, Der Nazi und der Friseur was first published in Germany in 1977 by the small publisher Helmut Braun, that is, after publication of an American edition in 1971 and several other

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translations. As would be the case with Ruth Klüger twenty-five years later, most major German publishing houses rejected the novel. In an interview with Der Spiegel, Hilsenrath speculated that he had trouble finding a publisher because of his “grotesque view of the whole Holocaust story.”

Indeed, the satirical story about a former SS mass murderer who assumes the role of his childhood friend (whom he himself killed) and subsequently becomes a Zionist freedom fighter is hardly what the average reader expected from a Holocaust survivor.

Most scholars read The Nazi and the Barber as a metaphor for postwar Germany (Braese, Krautz, Graf, Stenberg, Taylor) and situate it in the context of what Dan Diner, in the tradition of Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem, called “negative symbiosis.” Instead of true acceptance and critical engagement with its history of antisemitism, postwar Germany revelled in philosemitism, celebrating a past in which Jews and Germans coexisted peacefully. Both Gershom Scholem and Jean Améry complained as early as the 1950s about the lack of critical discourse in post-Second World War Germany. As recently as 2003, the author Henryk M. Broder spoke flippantly of “Germany's love for dead Jews.”

Within this set-up, The Nazi and the Barber uses the form of the ‘dual biographies’ of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries (Gustav Freytag, Wilhelm Raabe, Artur Dinter) as a foil for the postwar satire. While Hilsenrath’s novel beautifully exposes postwar philosemitism as a different form of antisemitism, it also poses questions of identity both on a personal level (Max Schulz’s personality and its ostensible changes) and


6 Freytag, Raabe and Dinter are the most famous novelists dealing with a German and a Jewish character in juxtaposition to each other. They are characterized by ambivalence and vary in degree in their antisemitism. Yet there is a plethora of other less known ‘dual biographies’. For further reference, see Alan Levenson, ‘The Problematics of Philosemitic Fiction’, in The German Quarterly, vol. 75, no. 4 (Autumn 2002), pp. 379-393. As Sander Gilman notes, Günter Grass’s Hundejahre can be read as a mirror to Hilsenrath. By giving the Jewish character Eduard Anselm an invented language, Grass continues not only the problematic tradition of dual biographies, but also seems to prove Gershom Scholem’s point of a negative symbiosis between Germans and Jews. Sander Gilman, Inscribing the Other, Lincoln, NE 1991, p. 255.
on a national level (is there such a thing as a prototypical ‘Nazi’, and what is a Jewish state?).

My reading of The Nazi and the Barber focuses on these questions of identity, and how they play out on the body/bodies of the protagonist(s). It is my claim that Hilsenrath uses bodily processes, such as Max Schultz’s decision to obtain a prisoner’s tattoo to pass as Itzig Finkelstein, to illustrate the impossibility of drawing a clear line between material bodies and abstract ideologies. While many Holocaust survivors had not received a tattoo—Auschwitz was the only camp that relied on tattooing as a means of identification—Max perpetuates the emerging iconic representation of the tattooed survivor, sporting a tattoo as proof of his concentration camp experience. In The Nazi and the Barber, bodies constantly transgress the line between metaphorical and literal meanings, and in doing so they question the validity and truth of both. Thus, the body and writing on the body can be read as subtexts of the novel, but also as constitutive elements of the genre ‘satire’ which they define and subvert at the same time.

FROM THE SS SHOOTING COMMANDO TO THE ZIONIST BRIGADES: THE MANY FACES OF MAX SCHULZ

From the first page on, The Nazi and the Barber presents itself as a novel of extremes. Max Schulz, the protagonist, is a highly unreliable narrator.\(^7\) He talks to an imagined reader about his life, but his motivations for doing so remain uncertain. His early childhood is defined by what Sigrid Lange called a “mirror of the Nazi theory of descent”.\(^8\) According to Max, his Aryan heritage can be established beyond the shadow of a doubt, yet he is not certain which of his mother’s five lovers is his real father. As the novel—and his life—unfolds, it becomes clear that his life story undermines and ridicules National Socialist racial ideology in every respect. His first step to true Aryanism seems to be the escape from an amateur circumcision by one of the lovers, who happens to be a butcher, commenting that “This is probably the place where you will ask yourself how it is that I know all this so exactly, but with the best will in the world I can’t tell you”.\(^9\) The reader is called upon to take this tale, and many similar ones, in good faith, a task that is not made any easier by the fact that Max identifies himself as a “future mass murderer”.\(^10\)

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\(^10\) “…zukünftiger Massenmörder”. Hilsenrath, p. 27.
Max grows up in a petit bourgeois milieu with his stepfather, Anton Slavitzki, who is driven by social envy, and a mother who shows no interest in her son. Although the hairdresser Chaim Finkelstein is his father’s greatest competitor, Max becomes close friends with Itzig Finkelstein, Chaim’s son. Itzig and Max grow up as playmates, but their friendship is characterized by inequality. While Itzig comes from a respected middle class family and helps Max with schoolwork, Max’s only demonstrable skill, which he dutifully teaches Itzig, is killing rats.11 Ironically, this inequality is mirrored in the outer appearance of Max and Itzig:

My friend Itzig was blond and blue-eyed, had a straight nose and finely shaped lips and teeth. I, on the other hand, Max Schulz, illegitimate though pure Aryan son of Minna Schulz, had black hair, frog eyes, a hooked nose, bulbous lips, and bad teeth. The fact that we were often confused you will, I hope, be able to understand.12

Here, Hilsenrath subverts a racial stereotype by turning it on its head. It is Itzig, not Max, who looks like a poster child for the Hitler Youth. The fact that the narrator addresses the reader with the assertion “you will, I hope, be able to understand” directly implicates the reader in racist ideology. Ironically, this same racial stereotype also allows young Max to stylize himself as a victim of dire circumstances: he is poor, uneducated, abused by a sadistic stepfather, and ugly. Chaim Finkelstein13 assures Max that he cannot possibly be a Jew, since “There are no Jews who look like you. But that is something they don’t know”.14 Finkelstein, who fervently believes in Germany as “an advanced country, a country where the dignity of man was respected”,15 adopts Max as a member of the family and also as an apprentice in his hair salon. Thus, Max goes to the synagogue, speaks Yiddish and dreams of Jerusalem. Yet, in spite of all the attention, friendship, and help he receives from the Finkelsteins, Max joins the SS. Max’s decision is not rationally motivated. His attendance at a Hitler speech turns into a bizarre transcendental experience, possibly a consequence of his often quoted “hole in the head”,16 which he cites repeatedly to justify his actions. According to the headmaster of Max’s old school, Rektor Salzstange, Hitler’s acolytes all have a “Dachschaden”: “All those

11 Ibid., p. 29.
13 It should also be noted that Chaim’s Hebrew first name translates into ‘life’. He offers Max a different life, and pays for it with his own.
14 “Es gibt keine Juden, die so aussehen wie du. Aber das wissen die nicht”. Hilsenrath, p. 32.
16 According to Minna Schulze, Max’s ‘Dachschaden’ comes from the initial rape Max experienced as a newborn by his stepfather. Also according to Minna, Slavitzki’s large penis destroyed part of Max’s cranium. While Minna’s opinion may not be medically sound, the idea of a trauma during early infancy destroying Max’s emotional and cognitive abilities is not that far-fetched. Unfortunately, White chose several translations for the German word ‘Dachschaden’, such as ‘hole in the head’, ‘off his rocker’, ‘bats in the belfry.’
gathered here today who ever had a knock on the head, whether from God or from man.” 17 While his former teacher’s words were most likely meant in a metaphorical sense, in Max Schulz’s case there are specific physical reasons for his mental impairment: he experiences visions because of the regular beatings he received from his stepfather, who accompanied these ministrations with biblical allusions and Hitler quotes. Max’s decisions are not the result of political reflections (if National Socialist slogans can be considered reflections). Rather, Max feels “an itching” in his rear end that turns into “a searing pain”, and then sees “the yellow and the black rod, saw Slavitzki’s cock hanging down from the back and the yellow rod, becoming a part of it, grinning jeeringly, an omen of my impotence”. 18 His political change of heart is the result of physical processes related to childhood trauma. Andrew White’s translation of “Ohnmacht” as “impotence” further highlights the symbiotic relationship of sex and violence evident in this passage. While the Jew Chaim Finkelstein is characterized by education, love and generosity, the German man is defined through displays of violence, sexual prowess and the perverse need to ally with one’s tormentor. The comment of Max’s mother when her husband shows up in his newly acquired SA uniform is telling: “Well, Anton, now you look like a man”. 19 Masculinity, violence and power are closely intertwined as politics are experienced and played out first and foremost on the body. Max’s story suggests that the human body is indeed “totally imprinted by history”, 20 as Michel Foucault argues, and this history unfolds in the form of power struggles, sex and violence. Hilsenrath’s narrator makes fun of postwar German discourses that connect Hitler’s rise to power with the wish to escape the (self-stylized) victimization by the First World War, the Versailles Treaty, and the dire economic depression. But he also highlights changing conceptualizations of the body in early twentieth-century Germany. This change of body politics, of Körperkultur, from the Weimar years to the National Socialist dictatorship, is played out on Max’s body: no longer the ugly, abused and maltreated child of the Weimar Republic, Max now “looks like a man”. Later when he joins the “Black Puritans”, the SS, he even feels like a man, even though his face is still “bewitched”. 21

Max soon moves up the ranks of the SS. During the war he is promoted to camp commandant of the concentration camp ‘Laubwalde’ in Poland, where he personally shoots his friend Itzig and Itzig’s parents. At the end of the war Max barely escapes Russian partisans, not because of a cunning master plan but because his raging diarrhoea keeps him out of the partisans’ line of fire. Max is again reduced to a bodily function: the excremental philosophy of National

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Socialism quite literally reduces him to faeces. But even as Max Schulz is emptying himself while hanging halfway out of a truck driving through the forests of Poland, he declares “Only sub-humans shit like that.”

It is notable in this context that the emptying of the stomach is generally one of the first and last biological processes in human life. Seen in this light, Max's faecal interlude foreshadows his rebirth. Max survives the winter in the hut of the witch Veronja, who beats and rapes him on a regular basis, but does not kill him (“She probably wanted to teach me something”)

and returns to Germany with nothing but a diary and a bag of gold teeth, robbed from his victims. He then, for the first time in the novel, makes a conscious decision, to make a fresh start:

Max Schulz! If you are going to have a second life, you should live as a Jew. After all... we lost the war. And the Jews won it. And I, Max Schulz, have always been an Idealist. But a particular idealist. One who trims his sail to every wind that blows. Because he knows, that it is easier to live on the side of the victors, instead of the side of the defeated. And the Jews won the war.

In choosing to become a Jew, Max consciously chooses a life that he himself used to consider subhuman. Again, his new identity is anchored in the body: “The worst thing is that I'm going to have to do some knife work on my cock... just the skin at the front, then I'll be circumcised.”

Max's idea of the body as a site of shifting identities is striking and bizarre. While it was common for former perpetrators to claim that they had been mere followers during the National Socialist period, Max's decision to pretend to be a victim is so ruthless and delusional that it borders on the schizophrenic. In order to complete his new bodily identity, he turns to his friend, Horst Kumpel, a tattooist without legs, whom he finds in the ruins of Berlin.

‘Can you tattoo me Horst?’ Horst grinned. What do you want: a woman with large breasts? Strawberries for tits? Or cherries? Or toads? ... A cunt or two? Or a rose?'

I said, ‘A concentration camp number Horst. What I want is a concentration camp number.’

For a while we cracked jokes. Then Horst said: ‘My God, Max, it seems to me that you're a damned Jew after all.’
I said: ‘Number one-two-three-one-four! And in front of the number a letter. The letter A!’

[Horst] ‘Why an A? Why not an L? You were in Laubwalde, weren’t you?’ [Max] ‘…Auschwitz, Horst! That has a better effect! It’s better known.’

This is the central scene in the transformation from Max Schulz to Itzig Finkelstein. Unlike many scholars who read the journey to Palestine as transformational (Braese, Kraft), because Max addresses Itzig Finkelstein directly in an inner monologue, I submit that Max’s bodily transformation is the key to his new identity. The problem then consists in the fact that Max’s body already bears the marks of his former life: the SS tattoo; “a pretty unsightly tattoo, a small letter denoting my blood type.” Fortunately, one of his fellow National Socialist cronies removes this mark by shooting through it. What once denoted membership of the “Black Puritans” and the licence to torture and kill, now looks like a scar from another assault on the body. Max’s tattoos are the literal results of the inscription of Foucauldian power systems on a body. According to Foucault, “the body is…directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use”. To be sure, Max Schulz’s story suggests otherwise. Even in his introduction to the reader, Max Schulz mentions a power structure inscribed through genealogy: his Aryan descent. His identity therefore is constantly revised and rewritten on his body, and yet the traces of older inscriptions of power persist. Just as his friend Itzig did not “escape without a scratch”, Max’s appropriation of the victim’s identity cannot erase all traces of his “unsightly” SS tattoo, now reduced to a scar on the body. Consequently, Max Schulz’s appropriation of Itzig Finkelstein’s identity will always remain fragmentary. Itzig died and is frozen in time, but Max Schulz grows older. As he ages, his body becomes the site of several identities: Max Schulz the victim of domestic abuse, Max marked by the ugly scar of an SS tattoo, and Max as a recreation of Itzig Finkelstein via tattooed number and circumcision. In *The Jew’s Body* (1991), Sander Gilman writes about the Jewish desire

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29 The corresponding proverb in German is even more fitting: ‘Mit heiler Haut davonkommen.’
for invisibility, as a protection from a canonized vocabulary and subsequently a world of difference and discrimination. Linking the desire for invisibility to the African-American phenomenon of ‘passing’ (for white), he concludes that in both groups “a set of rigid boundaries give specific meaning to the body”.

Max is only too aware of these boundaries, and reproduces them on his own body; he ‘passes’ for Jewish.

Subsequent to receiving his tattoo Max becomes obsessed with Jewish history, emmigrates to Palestine, marries a victim of an SS shooting commando, and is recruited as a Zionist freedom fighter. During this period, his self-perception stabilizes. Ironically, little change is required since the language of Max and his Zionist brothers-in-arms bears an uncanny similarity to National Socialist rhetoric. When his friend Sigi Weinrauch jokes about Zionism, Max calls him an “enemy of the people” and comments dryly that “We used to call that sort of thing ‘corruption of the truth’.” While this serves as an ironic ploy of Hilsenrath to illustrate Max’s shrewdness, it is also a cynical comment on Zionist ideals. As Omer Bartov writes, “The Nazi manifest will to sacrifice, devotion to a cause, urge to take revenge on real and imagined enemies, and unbound ruthlessness and cruelty were constructed as an ambiguous example to the future generation of Israeli warriors.”

Dalia Ofer describes the tensions between the Zionist self-image and the new immigrants of the late 1940s and 1950s in a similar vein: between the heroization of active resistance, and the accusation of survivors to have been led “like sheep to slaughter” (Abba Kovner), the battle cry “Never again!” emerged. “The role played by those words has been important in Israeli discourse whenever an existential threat could be perceived.” Instead of the biblical “land of milk and honey”, Max finds himself in a highly divided and increasingly militarized state—and is in his element once again. Max’s physical ambiguity, his Aryan body, the supposedly Jewish phenotype, the “mangled cock”, the fake prisoner tattoo, and the scar of an SS tattoo, are reproduced in the contradictions of the society in

31 Hilsenrath, transl. by White, p. 298. Quote in the original: “Wir nannten sowas ’Zersetzung’.”
32 Omer Bartov, ‘Kitsch and Sadism in Ka-tzetnik’s “other planet”: Israeli Youth imagine the Holocaust’, in Jewish Social Studies, new series, vol. 3, no.3 (Winter 1997), pp. 42-76 (p. 48). Iris Milner also comments that “there was a widespread tendency within Israeli society to denounce the conduct of the Nazi victims. This included not only outright condemnation of so-called collaborators, but also a perception of European Jewry in general as having gone passively to its death like ‘sheep to the slaughter’ and thus in fact having collaborated with the murderers’ scheme...Holocaust survivors...at least to some extent were perceived as a threat to its heroic ethos.” Iris Milner, ‘The ‘Gray Zone’ Revisited: The Concentratorium County in Ka-tzetnik’s Literary Testimony’, in Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society, new series, vol. 14, no.2 (2008), pp. 113-155 (pp. 122-124).
34 Hilsenrath, transl. by White, p. 158.
which he lives: Even in the promised land, a hair salon differentiates between German Jews and Ostjuden, while eastern Jews and his Zionist friends use polemic slogans that evoke National Socialist rhetoric.

At this point, it is no longer clear whether Max is aware of his identity as a mass murderer. The novel, when addressing the reader, makes repeated use of the phrase “ich, Itzig Finkelstein”, which serves as a constant reminder of Max’s identity fraud. At the same time, Max employs his fake identity to manipulate others. In his performance of a concentration camp victim, Max utilizes the power structures inscribed onto his skin as an excuse for his odd behaviour: “He looked pitifully at my concentration camp number and he probably thought: He has lost his mind. SS-boots! Kicks to the head! He is off his rocker!” On the surface, Max’s body is subservient to the tattoo, a Foucauldian ‘docile body’. Elaborating on the concept of the ‘docile body’, Susan Bordo writes: “Our conscious politics, social commitments, strivings for change may be undermined and betrayed by the life of our bodies—not the craving body, but what Foucault calls the ‘docile body’, regulated by the norms of cultural life.” In Max Schulz, body and mind are not only polar opposites but engaged in a fierce battle. Material reality, the culture Max lives in, and his bodily reality—his body, his tattoos, his physical presence—are caught in a dialectical struggle with his conscious awareness of his past as a mass murderer and identity thief. Once he is tattooed, Max’s body becomes the site of a violent master-slave clash. The tattooed number that symbolizes Itzig’s past, Max’s activities as Zionist freedom fighter, and his enthusiastic speeches about the development of the new Jewish state, turn Max Schulz into Itzig Finkelstein in everyone’s mind but his own. Ironically, when Max reveals his identity to his friend Wolfgang Richter, the latter does not believe him: “You have quite an imagination, Mr. Finkelstein.” “Mrs. Finkelstein! Your husband has lost his mind!” Interestingly, it is again the body that rebels against a life of lies and deceit: Max’s heart fails. In the battle between mind and matter, the body gives

35 In Inscribing the Other, Sander Gilman describes Alfred Döblin’s observations on eastern Jews during his Travels to Poland. The latter clearly differentiates between himself as a “liberal German writer” and the eastern European Jews as full of superstitions, living in primitive surroundings, using what he perceives as inarticulate Yiddish. Gilman, p. 254.
36 Undoubtedly, Hilsenrath’s own experiences in Palestine between 1944 and 1947, which left him highly critical of the country, are reflected in Max’s observations on the new society. As Helmuth Braun writes: “He registered with great discomfort how arrogantly the Jews were treating the Arabs. His experiences during the Shoah had turned him into a person that was different to the settlers, who had come to conquer the country of Palestine.” (Translation by author). Quote in the original: “Mit Unbehagen registrierte er [Hilsenrath], wie überheblich die Juden mit den Arabern umgingen, seine Erfahrungen während der Shoah hatten ihn zu einem anderen Menschen gemacht, als es die Siedler waren, die gekommen waren, das Land Palästina zu erobern.” Helmuth Braun, Ich bin nicht Ranek, Annäherungen an Edgar Hilsenrath, Berlin, 2006, p. 85
38 Susan Bordo, Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body, Berkeley 1993, p. 165. Even though Bordo ultimately hopes to erode the opposition between consciousness and the unconscious, material reality of the body, here she presents these concepts as polar opposites.
way and reveals the core of Max's identity. As Andreas Graf writes: “His three heart attacks are the failing of the organ that, not only in German fairy tale tradition, houses courage and empathy.”

Again, the text transgresses lines between literalness—his heart attack, and metaphor—his lack of empathy and courage. Yet, due to the power structures around Max, a society that views him as a Zionist hero, and his victim status embodied in the tattoo, his environment fails to recognize the truth (when he is scheduled to receive a heart transplant, his wife specifically asks for a Jewish heart). Max’s heart may rebel and show the truth, but his environment responds to the visible inscriptions of power on the body: Max is perceived as a Jew, as a victim of the concentration camps, a Zionist freedom fighter. Although to Max himself the tattooed number does not hold any intrinsic meaning, others attach meaning to it; these assumptions and his lifelong charade transform Max Schulz into Itzig Finkelstein. It is telling that the only place where he is seen for what he truly is, namely a ruthless mass murderer, is in the ‘Forest of the Six Million’. This forest, located west of Jerusalem, near the Kisalon riverbed, was planted in 1951; its six million trees symbolize the victims of the Holocaust. Yet, forests and nature also evoke the tradition of German Romanticism and Waldeinsamkeit—refuge from the world, a natural state of being, a blank slate, a space where Max is in his natural state. In his seminal work *Crowds and Power* (1960), Elias Canetti, drawing on this notion, describes the forest as a natural symbol for the individual’s feeling in a crowd: “Once in the forest, man feels sheltered... Thus the forest is the first image of awe. It compels man to look upwards, grateful for the protection above... The forest is a preparation for the feeling of being in church, the standing before God.” At the same time, Canetti suggests, the forest, with its rootedness in the ground and its immovable presence, represents an army. As such, the forest has become the national symbol of the Germans. “In the forest he [the young German boy] found others waiting for him, true, faithful, and upright as he himself wanted to be.” Not only does the “Forest of the Six Million” foreshadow Max’s death, and—in the American version—his standing before God, but it negates his entire being. He is not in the company of his peers, but in the company of his victims who stand “upright” as he himself never was. This natural (German) state, the encompassing security of the forest here does not symbolize fraternity and strength but his imminent death. In a last ironic twist, the dying Max feels a wind from the “Forest of the Six Million” carry him away. Instead of truth, shelter, or romantic feelings of transcendence, and unity...
between inner and outer world, Max experiences death in the “Forest of the Six Million.”

**THE NAZI AND THE BARBER AS TRANSGRESSIVE SATIRE**

The classical definition of satire as a literary genre within German literature was given by Friedrich Schiller: “In satire, the real as deficiency is put in opposition to the ideal as the highest reality.”\(^{44}\) Looking back to ancient times, Schiller contended that his contemporaries had lost unity with nature whereas the na"ıve denizens of ancient times were in harmony with nature. Reality then is ‘deficiency’, a lack of authenticity. The ideal is defined as a wholeness of being, which was lost over time. A satire then is a text that stylizes and exaggerates the wretchedness of reality, in order to further the betterment of mankind. Drawing on Schiller’s definition, Kurt Tucholsky attempted to modernize the definition of satire in 1919: “The satirist is a hurt idealist: he wants to have a good world, the world is bad, and now he runs against the bad”.\(^{45}\) Twelve years of dictatorship and a World War later, The Nazi and the Barber both reaffirms and subverts Tucholsky’s notion of satire. Max Schulz is the polar opposite of an ideal human being or what one refers to as a ‘mensch’ in Yiddish. Whenever he tries to convince his reader that he is a victim, his body betrays him while confirming his victimization at the same time: he was after all beaten and raped by his father. But instead of a traditional ‘innocence lost’ narrative in which the victim turns out to be a perpetrator, from the beginning of the novel, Hilsenrath cynically presents the reader with the ugliest side of humanity. Even in the early days of his childhood, Max slowly torments rats to death. From the moment he is born, there is not a glimmer of empathy or dignity in Max Schulz. Both Schiller’s and Tucholsky’s definition of satire assumes an ideal, a world toward which we strive teleologically (in Schiller’s understanding) and actively (in Tucholsky’s satirical battle cries for more political awareness). Such satire has an implicit didactic function which is completely absent in Hilsenrath’s novel. The only people who act with kindness, and who fiercely believe in Enlightenment values, the Finkelstein family, are brutally killed off, and even the new Jewish state enacts a guerrilla war against anything that even remotely resembles Arabic influence.

Once more, the novel underscores Max Schulze’s utter monstrosity through a physical process: he cannot procreate. He and his wife Mira have a son, who dies after a day because he is fatally deformed: “He had neither body nor face. He had


\(^{45}\) “Der Satiriker ist ein gekrankter Idealist: er will die Welt gut haben, sie ist schlecht, und nun rennt er gegen das Schlechte an”. Kurt Tucholsky, ‘Was darf die Satire?” in Gesammelte Werke, Reinbek 1975, p. 42. Translation by author.
only eyes. And they fixed themselves upon me once, then closed forever.” Hilsenrath, p. 433.46 Here, his child, who is a monster on the outside, beholds with his “Froschaugen” the true, inner monstrosity of Max. The monstrous, yet innocent child cannot survive in a world filled with lies, hate, and murder.47 Max Schulz cannot learn anything, because there is no lesson to be learned. All there is, is a chain of victimization, a tale of victims who turn into victimizers when given half a chance. In The Nazi and the Barber, bodies constantly transgress the boundaries of the metaphorical and the literal, of performance and truth, and this confusion of borderlines emphasizes the dissonant character of the genre of satire. The reader is duped into thinking that he is reading a satire only to be confronted with a world that has become a nomos—a non-place thinly veiled by the fiction of a civilized society. Hilsenrath evokes the genre of satire, and his characters superficially obey the rules of the form, yet the basic premise of the genre, that of an ideal that has been perverted, is no longer given. While Schiller’s and Tucholsky’s notions of satire were informed by an underlying belief in the humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment, Hilsenrath sings a radical swan song to this notion. Instead of education and ideals, the body, material reality, becomes “the touchstone of humanity”.48 When Heinrich Böll reviewed The Nazi and the Barber for the German newspaper Die Zeit, he titled it “Hans-in-luck in blood”49—referring to the German fairy tale of a ne’er-do-well, who out of sheer luck and cunning makes his way in the world. This light-hearted premise is broken by Böll’s addition “im Blut”, indicating that in the world of Max Schulz—and possibly the reader’s—there is no such thing as innocent luck and ‘making it’ without blood on one’s hands. Hilsenrath’s work, in the words of Erin McGlothlin, “confronts our anxieties and is not a fun read, but as ugly as the Holocaust”.50

CONCLUSION

Hilsenrath’s text is subversive on several levels; as Erin McGlothlin has shown, it deconstructs any theological interpretation of the Holocaust. Thomas Kraft and Stephan Braese’s interpretations of The Nazi and the Barber have revealed the German postwar philosemitism as nothing but lip service, while the mental attitude remained unchanged. My reading focused on how corporeality and identity politics both underscore and transgress the genre of satire. Satire by

46 Hilsenrath, transl. by White, p. 355. „Hatte keinen Körper und kein Gesicht, nur Augen… Und die guckten mich einmal an, und schlossen sich für immer” Hilsenrath, p. 433.
47 In his later, widely acclaimed novel Story of the Last Thought (New York 1990), Hilsenrath draws even more radical consequences to the interrelatedness of identity, body and material reality. Consciously neglecting discourses of ideology and politics, he suggests a focus on the commonalities of genocides, by bringing to the fore the brutal and sadistic assaults on the body of the individual. Also, one of the survivors is, like Max and Mira’s child, all eyes.
48 Lorenz, p. 148.
50 McGlothlin, p. 235.
Edgar Hilsenrath’s “The Nazi and the Barber”

definition aims for a better world, but Hilsenrath questions the existence of such a world. While Hilsenrath’s novel may not fit into the category of testimonial literature, it presents an important voice among the representations of the Holocaust. By confronting us with a world in which the Holocaust was not a singular event triggered by extraordinary circumstances, but committed by ordinary people with regular mind sets, Hilsenrath does not adhere to the call of ‘Never again’. Rather, he cautions us to pay attention to discourses and mental attitudes of society. “It is not essential to take pictures of Auschwitz nor write about Auschwitz. What matters to me is showing the zeitgeist. My plot does not have to happen in Auschwitz. It suffices to be set in a room, one in which Auschwitz is in our heads”.51 The Holocaust begins in our minds, and in The Nazi and the Barber it has never stopped.