Agency, Ethics and Responsibility in Holocaust Fiction:

Child Figures as Catalysts in Bruno Apitz’s *Nackt unter Wölfen* (1958) and Edgar Hilsenrath’s *Nacht* (1964)*

In Holocaust fiction, narrated children act as catalysts for adult behaviour, which reinstates agency and thus responsibility in the persecuted and largely powerless adults. Since child figures help reclaim an ethical dimension for human interaction, they point to the ethical foundations of the texts. Thomas Scanlon’s contractualist approach to moral philosophy in his *What We Owe to Each Other* (1998) is used to compare two German Holocaust novels: Bruno Apitz’s successful *Nackt unter Wölfen* (1958) and Edgar Hilsenrath’s *Nacht* (1964), a book with a far more protracted and conflicted reception history. Exploring the relationship between (1) the role of child figures in these books, (2) the ethical issues thus raised, and (3) the publication and reception history of the texts concerned, shows that the radically different responses to the novels are rooted in their fundamentally different ethical cores: while Apitz reassuringly uses his communist Buchenwald prisoners’ heroic saving of an infant boy to demonstrate that moral motivation is rationally grounded and that the demands of rational choice do not conflict with those of morality, in Hilsenrath’s dire ghetto Prokov, chances for making ethical choices such as those posed by children in need are recognized as such – but mostly not heeded in the inexorable struggle for survival, so that the ethical is equated with the irrational, and the unethical with the rational. Child figures create opportunities for adult characters to respond to moral dilemmas, which is more significant than their potential as generic, iconic figures of suffering in the service of the Holocaust »industry«.

1. Introduction


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In these (and other) Holocaust narratives, the significance of child figures does, of course, vary greatly. Thus, we encounter children as protagonists or as more marginal characters; children can fulfil a major or merely a minor function for the plot, and they can be objects of narration, portrayed by an adult narrator, or subjects of narration, in which case they represent the main focalizer.¹

The attractions of child figures are manifold. Firstly, as Debbie Pinfold explains, there is the traditional West European Romantic idealization of childhood as a time of innocence, happiness and closeness to nature. This foil provides a stark and dramatic contrast to the fate of Jewish children under Nazi rule. Secondly, children are regarded as particularly vulnerable and helpless so that their plight appeals to parental instincts in an adult readership. Thirdly, the child who has lost his or her innocence through the experience of persecution, and now appears too streetwise, prematurely aged etc., can symbolize the unhinged world of Nazi atrocities. Fourthly, children represent the future. This is a particularly strong aspect of Jewish culture, where children of persecuted Jews are often named after those who did not survive the Holocaust, thus serving as «memorial candles».²

Fifthly, where a child is the subject of narration, his or her limited insight can create a «hiatus» in the text which requires the reader to fill in the gaps, thus involving the reader more strongly and presenting the facts of the Shoa in a new light.³ Pinfold holds that one of the main functions of child focalizers is their provision of a credible modern outsider’s (defamiliarizing) perspective.⁴


⁴ Pinfold: The Child’s View of the Third Reich in German Literature (ref. 1), 4.
While all this is true, I want to approach the topic of child figures in Holocaust fiction from a different perspective. What interests me is the function narrated children have for the agency of adult figures whom they encounter. I think that children can act as catalysts for adult behaviour. When living in hiding, in ghettos or in camps, children would normally be expected to have even less agency than the adults who find themselves in the same situation. Where adult characters are faced with or confront child figures, adults have to make up their minds how to respond to the child, have to choose between right and wrong courses of action – this crucially reinstates agency (and, by implication, responsibility) in a group of people who have precious little agency left because of their situation which seriously curtails their range of behavioural options. In a world where human beings have been reduced to their ›bare life‹, to use Giorgio Agamben’s phrase, child figures can help reclaim an ethical dimension for human interaction and thus potentially give back dignity to the adult characters. This means that child figures need to be read alongside the ethical frameworks evoked by their presence and their interaction with adult figures. At the same time, the moral aspect of adult responses to children (but also other human beings) is a key factor in the reception of such narrated encounters by the reading public.

I shall base my analysis on two novels which feature child figures who present adult ones with moral dilemmas, two books whose reception differs substantially: Bruno Apitz’s \textit{Nackt unter Wölfen} (1958) and Edgar Hilsenrath’s \textit{Nacht} (1964). Both book manuscripts were completed in the mid–1950s as first novels penned by authors born in the East German city of Leipzig, by men who had been victimized by the Nazis: the communist Apitz spent eight years of his life in Buchenwald concentration camp; the Jew Hilsenrath was deported to the Ukrainian ghetto Moghilev-Podolsk in Rumania-controlled Transnistria, where he lived from 1941 to 1944. \textit{Nackt unter Wölfen} and \textit{Nacht} are partly based on their authors’ personal experiences of persecution and imprisonment. Both novels are grounded in realist narrative traditions. But the publication history and reception of the two works are very different indeed. It is my assertion that the divergent responses the novels met with can be explained by their different ethical foundations which become evident when studying the functions of the narrated child figures.


If Berel Lang is right in claiming that »professional« philosophers [...] have contributed relatively little, in quantity or significance, to Holocaust Studies and that (American) »contemporary philosophy has yet to overcome its estrangement from history« in a field dominated by historical enquiry, then one answer is to look for philosophical work that, while not explicitly linked to the Holocaust by their authors, can usefully be applied to Holocaust Studies. One of the most important current contributions to analytic moral philosophy is Thomas Scanlon’s contractualist study *What We Owe to Each Other.* I shall construct my argument by utilizing some of Scanlon’s key tenets for my analysis. What I am proposing, then, is to undertake a form of triangulation: to explore the relationships between child figures in Holocaust fiction, the ethical issues thus raised, and the publication and reception history of the texts concerned.

2. Reception: Political Readings

Initially, the prospects for *Nackt unter Wölfen* were not exactly rosy: Apitz, who lived in East Berlin and had no regular income at the time, was struggling to write the book so that, in 1955, he asked the GDR’s Writers’ Union for financial support, but he was turned down. However, when Martin Gregor-Dellin from Halle’s Mitteldeutscher Verlag (MDV) read an outline of about 30 pages, he decided to support the project. After two and a half years of close editorial cooperation with Apitz, the manuscript was completed. Thirty years on, Gregor-Dellin stated that several copies of the text had to be sent to the Politbureau prior to obtaining the required permission to print from the Ministry of Culture. Today, the surviving ministerial files do not contain any reference to this occurrence; but if the reader’s memory is correct, the key party functionaries must have been impressed with Apitz’s creation: the application for permission to print indicates that the book was meant to come out in time for the Vth Party Congress (July 1958), which was why the permission to start type-setting the book was granted although one commissioned reference for the manuscript was still outstanding; also, the planned initial print-run as suggested by the publisher was increased from 8,000 to 10,000.11 When the book appeared, it sold out so quickly that it was

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reprinted four times in the same year, and by the end of 1959, the novel had seen a total of nine editions. This brought the number of copies sold in the first two years to 179,920; Bill Niven reports that the publisher «found itself rushing to catch up with demand» and that by 1976, »MDV had published thirty-eight editions – 925,000 copies all in all«. The book became the biggest-ever bestseller of GDR literature: as many as six publishing houses of the GDR published more than two million copies of the book; the world-wide circulation exceeds three million, and the book was translated into more than thirty languages. As early as 1958, Apitz was awarded the GDR's highest-ranking decoration, the Nationalpreis (national award), in recognition of his achievement. Frank Beyer’s 1963 film version was seen by as many as 800,000 cinemagoers in the first year – a remarkable audience for a film set in a concentration camp.

By contrast, the publication and reception history of Hilsenrath’s Nacht is a far more protracted and conflicted one. When finishing the book, Hilsenrath lived in New York, and it proved extremely difficult to find a publisher for a German novel by an unknown writer. Eventually, Hilsenrath found an influential supporter in Henry Marx, the editor-in-chief of the biggest German daily in New York, Staatszeitung und Herold: Marx was enthusiastic about the book and recommended it to Hans-Geert Falkenberg, the editor-in-chief of the renowned Kindler Verlag in Munich. Falkenberg was impressed with the manuscript so that a contract between Kindler and Hilsenrath was signed in April 1964; but Ernest Landau, in charge of publicity at Kindler’s, tried to prevent the publication of Nacht when the book was already in print. The 1964 first edition was for 1,250 copies only, and many of these never even reached the book shops. In fact, after

11 As per the comments on the Druckgenehmigungsantrag (application for permission to print), type-setting was authorized by Elshold on March 19, 1958; the permission to print dates from April 3, 1958. The note referring to the increase of the print-run is undated. BArch DR I / 3941, 148 (Bundesarchiv – Federal Archive, Berlin).
12 Hähnel / Lemke: Millionen lesen einen Roman (ref. 9), 23.
14 Niven: The Buchenwald Child (ref. 13), 108.
15 Hähnel / Lemke: Millionen lesen einen Roman (ref. 9), 21.
having sold only 791 copies, Kindler withdrew the remaining copies in April 1965, a decision which Landau tried to justify to Hilsenrath by pointing to existing anti-Semitic tendencies in the German public. However, Kindler successfully sold the rights abroad: in 1966, Night came out with Doubleday in the US and with de Boeckerij in the Netherlands; one year later, W. H. Allen in London made the book available to British readers. Only after Hilsenrath’s second novel, Der Nazi und der Friseur (The Nazi and the Barber, 1977), had done well both in West Germany and abroad, Helmut Braun, a fairly obscure, young Cologne publisher, reissued Nacht in 1978 with a print-run of 50,000. By that time, the book had already sold half a million times in the USA; the overall number of copies sold outside Germany stood at 800,000. But according to Braun, only about 150,000 copies of the German edition have been sold to date. And it was not until the late 1980s that Hilsenrath received awards for his literary work in Germany. So far, there is no film version of Nacht.

Explanations offered for the big success of Nackt unter Wölfen and the long years of silence blighting Nacht (at least in the German reading public where the book was effectively unavailable until 1978) are usually political ones: while Apitz’s novel with its description of how a toddler hidden in Buchenwald was saved by a group of heroic underground communists, a story loosely grounded in a historical case, is regarded as having pandered to East German political doctrine so that the book became canonical reading in the GDR, Hilsenrath’s bleak, grotesque and sexually explicit portrayal of amorality, selfishness and brutality among inmates of the (fictional) ghetto Prokov is seen to have upset West German philosemitic sensibilities so that the novel had a hard time in the Federal Republic’s literary sphere. Some examples may serve to demonstrate this kind of politically grounded reading.

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19 Dietrich Dopheide: Das Groteske und der schwarze Humor in den Romanen Edgar Hilsenrath's. Berlin: Weißensee Verlag 2000, 16f; Hien: Schreiben gegen den Philosemitismus (ref. 18), 233; Möller: Zur Rezeption (ref. 6), 103–116, here 106. – Vahsen says only 1,200 copies were printed. Cf. Vahsen: Lesarten (ref. 17), 40.
20 Möller: Zur Rezeption (ref. 6), 106.
21 Hien: Schreiben gegen den Philosemitismus (ref. 18), 241.
22 Ibid. 243.
24 Möller: Zur Rezeption (ref. 6), 109.
25 Braun: Nachwort (ref. 6), 646. – In 2005, Nacht appeared as the first of the now completed ten-volume edition of Hilsenrath’s collected works, published by Dittrich.
27 Nacht ohne Morgen (2006) by Bernhard Pfletschinger and Margarita Fotiadis is a documentary.
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In the GDR, Apitz’s fictionalized account complemented the ongoing idealization of Buchenwald’s ›red Kapos‹ as selfless, heroic antifascist fighters, which was a welcome white-washing myth much needed in post-war East Germany and the young GDR, because former communist camp functionaries had come under attack for their role in the Nazis’ extermination machinery. Accordingly, Bill Niven sees Nackt unter Wölfen as a »piece of tendentious socialist historiography« whose positive portrayal of communist resistance made the novel a suitable ›memorial‹ of antifascist resistance, an illustration of communist humanism and an »ideal vehicle for promoting« a »policy […] of self-exculpation« from Nazi crimes.\(^{28}\) Thomas Taterka affirms that the book was not a commissioned piece, irrespective of the fact that the Committee of Antifascist Resistance Fighters (KAW), cultural politics and the Ministry of Culture’s censorious Office for Literature and Publishing (Amt für Literatur und Verlagswesen) were positively ›longing‹ for a book that could exemplify socialist realism, popularize the ideology of antifascist resistance, and help to exonerate the ›red Kapos‹.\(^{29}\) The accusation of communist prisoners’ complicity with the Nazis threatened not only the legitimacy of these individuals’ political careers in the Soviet zone but also – by extension – that of the official claim of the GDR to represent a better, antifascist Germany. What began as the Kapos’ defensive self-justification »was transformed into the official memory of the SED«.\(^{30}\) Taterka describes how the ›Buchenwalders‹ – exposed, discredited and politically untenable – were collectively chosen as historic role models in ethics and politics, an image which was to act for the young state as a mirror in which to recognize itself.\(^{31}\) Perhaps not surprisingly, GDR scholars take a less sceptical approach. Hähnel and Lemke chart the novel’s reception in socialist Germany over time, from its initial perception as an authentic documentary and a topical contribution to Cold War-warnings about the dangers emanating from ongoing fascism, militarism and capitalism as allegedly posed by West Germany’s remilitarization, to the novel’s standing as a symbol of antifascist resistance and its main characters’ quality as role models for the »realen Humanismus der Arbeiterklasse« (real humanism of the working class).\(^{32}\) For Helga Herting, the strong impact of Apitz’s novel is grounded in the significance of its humanistic ideas, the importance of the narrated conflict and its »parteiliche Lösung« (party-political solution).\(^{33}\) Judgments about the book’s literary qualities are

\(^{28}\) Niven: The Buchenwald Child (ref. 13), 109f.
\(^{30}\) Niven: The Buchenwald Child (ref. 13), 3. – ›SED‹ stands for ›Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands‹ (Socialist Unity Party).
\(^{31}\) Taterka: ›Buchenwald liegt in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik‹ (ref. 29), 326.
\(^{32}\) Hähnel / Lemke: Millionen lesen einen Roman (ref. 9), 24–27; quotation on 27. – All translations from German secondary literature are my own, B.M.
divided along the political fault-lines between East and West: while Hähnel and Lemke speak of a gripping, easy read and praise the clear and reader-friendly construction of the text, Wilfried F. Schoeller perceives a »Netz an Trivialmustern« (net of trivial patterns) in a novel which owes its »Ausdrucksmittel dem Groschenroman« (literary devices to pulp fiction), and Marcel Reich-Ranicki even denies that the book is of any aesthetic significance at all, panning it as obviously sentimental, riddled with stylistic infelicities, and dismissing the central conflict as unrealistic and dishonest, although he has to concede that Apitz has a feel for effective situations and dramatic scenes in a story whose heroic rescue of a child is based on the very defiance of party discipline; this review was in turn characterized as anti-communist by Hähnel and Lemke.34

The reluctance of West German publishers to disseminate Nacht widely is usually explained by pointing towards a normative philosemitism in post-war guilt-ridden (West) Germany, a powerful »Verabredung« (agreement) which is said to have demanded the representation of Jews in one-sidedly positive ways only, namely as morally impeccable, ›good‹ victims, while effectively repressing more mixed views.35 Vahsen holds that the public philosemitic consensus enabled individuals to revise their attitudes towards Jews and served to bring about a collective moral legitimization much needed in the young democracy.36 Hilsenrath himself blames philosemitism for the difficulties his first (and second) novel had in Germany: »Ich habe die Philosemiten erschreckt« (I’ve given the philosemites a fright).37 Dirk Kurbjuweit states that the book portrays Jews in a way which was not allowed in 1960s Germany, because Jews had to be ›good‹, and any portrayal diverging from this norm was regarded as anti-semitic; hence Hilsenrath’s memories, Kurbjuweit concludes, were not politically correct.38 Hien documents how Ernest Landau distributed promotional copies of the novel to selected booksellers, journalists and historians, asking the recipients whether this publication could not be harmful.39 While the nine letters Landau received by way of a

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35 Hien: Schreiben gegen den Philosemitismus (ref. 18), 231f.
36 Vahsen: Lesarten (ref. 17), 13.
39 Hien: Schreiben gegen den Philosemitismus (ref. 18), 230. (Hien quotes from a letter of Landau’s to Joseph Wulf, dated July 31, 1964.)
reply, together with Landau’s own two statements purporting to reflect views expressed in relevant telephone conversations, display a wide spectrum of responses to the question asked, Landau ignored the positive voices and over-emphasized the negative ones; the publishers Helmut Kindler and Nina Raven-Kindler wanted to prevent »Beifall von der falschen Seite« (applause from the wrong quarters).\(^{40}\) Moeller thinks that Landau’s »negative propaganda must have been intended to collect rejections for the German market only«, as Landau was not opposed to the book being published outside Germany.\(^{41}\) It is therefore fair to conclude that the decision-makers at Kindler were worried about the political impact the book might have, rather than fearing commercial failure, a risk which could arguably have been diminished by advertising the book properly. Interestingly, Dopheide shows that \textit{Nacht} received predominantly positive reviews in Germany in the mid–1960s which did not express the view – feared by the publisher – that the book might stir up anti-semitic sentiments.\(^{42}\) And Möller points out that the number of German reviews had been surprisingly large, given the small circulation.\(^{43}\) Yet no other West German publisher went anywhere near the book until Hilsenrath met Helmut Braun, despite the international success of the novel abroad. Braun relaunched \textit{Nacht} after Hilsenrath’s \textit{Der Nazi und der Friseur} had caused quite a stir in the review pages of German broadsheets. Hien suspects that the willingness to read Hilsenrath’s work correlated with the new readiness to engage with the Third Reich and its mass murders, which she reads as a consequence of the student movement’s »eingeklagte Auseinandersetzung« (enforced critical engagement), a kind of coming to terms with the past informed by a sense of duty, which was tangible in the predominantly positive, but somewhat formulaic tone of most of the reviews written in 1978.\(^{44}\) It is fair to say, as Dopheide does, that Hilsenrath has remained a relatively unknown writer in Germany.\(^{45}\) With \textit{Nacht} generally being regarded as »das rücksichtsloseste der Genozid-Literatur« (the most relentless of genocide literature),\(^{46}\) it can be surmised that Hilsenrath’s uncompromising realism proved especially difficult for German readers.

\(^{40}\) Ibid. 230f and 232.
\(^{42}\) Dopheide: Das Groteske und der schwarze Humor (ref. 19), 263.
\(^{43}\) Möller: Zur Rezeption (ref. 6), 107.
\(^{44}\) Hien: Schreiben gegen den Philosemitismus (ref. 18), 237.
\(^{45}\) Dopheide: Das Groteske und der schwarze Humor (ref. 19), 16.
It would seem, then, that the very different publication and reception history of *Nackt unter Wölfen* and *Nacht* are inextricably connected with political and ideological attitudes prevailing in the German states in which these books appeared. However, such a political reading alone does not suffice, because it cannot explain why *Nackt unter Wölfen* was also very successful abroad where the long arm of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) could not reach; nor does it answer the question why *Nacht* should have been embraced much more willingly in the United States than in West Germany – surely, publishers and readers in the US are as philosemitic as those in the Federal Republic of Germany? It is also fair to say that Hilsenrath is the better writer of the two, which makes it even more surprising that *Nacht*, which is a gripping (albeit disturbing) read, did not find a wider audience in Germany until more than twenty years after its completion. It was never even published at all in the GDR, despite socialist Germany’s projection of Nazi guilt onto West Germans alone, a denial of responsibility which could have led to a more relaxed attitude towards Holocaust narratives. What is more, East Germany’s political climate was perhaps less philosemitic than that of its West German counterpart, because east of the Elbe, a rather critical stance towards Israel was adopted. And yet Hilsenrath’s novel was not published in the GDR. Pointing to the fact that *Nacht* is not informed by the ›right‹ class consciousness which might have made it more palatable for functionaries in the East would make life too easy: not every fictional book on the Holocaust published in the GDR subscribes to socialist ideology, as is demonstrated by Jurek Becker’s very successful *Jakob der Lügner* (1969).

3. Ethical Readings

I think that in order to explain the radically different responses to these two books, it is necessary to stand back from political, ideological or aesthetic considerations and to turn to moral ones instead. For these novels are characterized by fundamentally different treatments of ethical issues: while the moral framework underpinning *Nackt unter Wölfen* is easy to accept, even to identify with, *Nacht* is provocative in that it subverts, or at least questions, commonly held key moral values. Ethics is about criteria for distinguishing between right and wrong behaviour, and about making the morally right choice when a choice is to be made. Enlightenment thought tried to ground morality in rationality – for Kant, a rational human being is someone who lives by the categorical imperative. For contractualist moral philosophy, the »ideal of justifiability« of one’s actions to others

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explains moral motivation: »an act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of behaviour that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement«. Where somebody goes against this socially generated and mediated consensus, his or her behaviour would meet with disapproval, maybe even sanctions – hence the »normative force« of moral judgments.

Of course, the notion of choosing between right and wrong implies a free agent. In Hilsenrath’s ghetto and Apitz’s concentration camp, people are anything but free. How does that affect the moral fibre of the characters? And how do their actions and decisions affect the child figures? The novels negotiate ethics and rationality in diametrically opposed ways: in Nackt unter Wölfen, saving the toddler is a moral, but irrational choice in the circumstances; in Nacht, most adult figures’ actions are rational in the context, but unethical by ›normal‹ standards. Given this dialectic relationship between ethics and rationality, do the novels show the incommensurability of the two in a persecuted, imprisoned community fighting for survival? The books offer very different solutions to the – apparently conflicting – demands of ethics and reason. In Nackt unter Wölfen, what at first appears to be little more than an instinctive desire to protect the child, an impulse on which to act is extremely dangerous and therefore not wise, is gradually rationalized: the spontaneous decision to hide the child becomes a challenge to the illegal communist organization (International Camp Committee, ILK), a task to be performed under the watchful eyes of the Nazis. As the group identifies with the saving of the child, this undertaking becomes a political project which tests the strength and values of the group; as the men ›pass‹ the test, they emerge strengthened and can defeat the Nazis. Thus, the initial conflict between the needs of the child and the plans of the ILK is resolved by merging the two: the morally right choice becomes the rational one – virtue rewarded, and the child symbolizes the unison of morality and rationality. By contrast, Nacht portrays how in extreme circumstances, the instincts of starving human beings tend toward self-preservation – at the expense of other people’s needs. Arguably, it is perfectly rational for someone on the brink of starvation to steal food; but it might well not be the morally right thing to do. Hilsenrath’s ghetto Prokov is characterized by an ongoing economy of procurement and trade that commodifies everything and everyone, from mundane goods to human relationships, feelings and needs. There is little by way of an overarching development: the chasm between morality and rationality is not overcome, irrespective of isolated attempts at doing the ›right‹ thing by someone else. In both novels, child figures provide the most important opportunities for choosing a morally right course of action.

Encounters of adult and child figures in Holocaust fiction often go hand in hand with a (sudden) recognition, a realization that the child poses a challenge,

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48 Scanlon: What We Owe to Each Other (ref. 8), 155 and 153 respectively.

49 Ibid. 59, passim.
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requires a helping hand, calls on the adult to step into a protective role. This
chimes with Levinas’s notion of the ›face‹, which has to be seen in the context of
the philosopher’s contemplation of what it means ethically for the I to encounter
the ›other‹. Levinas’s key concept of the ›face‹ has nothing to do with physiognomy but rather with the idea of facing the other human being and responding
to him or her. It is both a metaphor and a concept for the primordial encounter
with the other which, according to Levinas, appeals to us to respond ethically, i.e.
responsibly, with kindness, compassion, and goodness:

For all eternity, one man is answerable for an other. From unique to unique. Whether
he looks at me or not, he ›regards me‹; I must answer for him. I call face that which
thus in another concerns the ›I‹ – concerns me – reminding me, from behind the
countenance he puts on in his portrait, of his abandonment, his defenselessness and his
mortality, and his appeal to my ancient responsibility, as if he were unique in the
world – beloved.50

Levinas does not confine this sense of ancient responsibility to adult-child-en-
counters; but it stands to reason that the child epitomizes the needy, and the
burden of responsibility is not an even one: it resides with the adult alone, and
realizing this can be a shock to the adult.

3.1. Rational Ethics: Apitz’s Nackt unter Wölfen

This is salient in Nackt unter Wölfen which hinges on the fate of a three-year old
Jewish boy (Stepan Cyliak) who is smuggled into Buchenwald in a suitcase. When
the prisoners Pippig and Höfel open the newly arrived Jankowski’s suitcase, cu-
riosity gives way to shock when they discover the child inside. Höfel sponta-
neously responds in a protective, decisive manner by ordering Pippig to hide their
find: »Weg damit! Verstecken! Schnell!« (»Get it away! Hide it! Quick!«).51 This
motif of revelation and response is continued when Pippig takes the suitcase to the
personal effects room, feeling like »ein glücklich beschenkter Junge« (18; »a child
happy over a new toy«, 20). He enjoys revealing the suitcase’s content to Kro-
pinski, a fellow prisoner. Pippig’s excitement, his expectant manner, his pride
might seem naive, but these sentiments also indicate that he has ›adopted‹ the child
as his: he stages the discovery of the boy almost like a Christmas present. What
does Kropinski see? »Im Koffer lag, in sich verkrümmt, ein Händchen vors Ge-
sicht gedrückt, ein in Lumpen gehülltes Kind. Ein Knabe, nicht älter als drei
Jahre« (19; »In the suitcase, huddled together, its little hands pressed to its face, lay
a child wrapped in rags. A boy, perhaps three years old«, 21). The child’s position
is obviously akin to that of a baby in the mother’s womb; the rags underline the

50 Emmanuel Levinas: Entre Nous. Thinking-of-the-Other. London / New York: Con-
tinuum 2006, 196f.
Berlin: Seven Seas 1960, 18. – Page references to these editions in brackets in the text henceforth.
poverty and neediness of the boy. Kropinski crouches down and stares at the child, speechless with surprise at first. He then addresses the child in Polish, his mother-tongue, asking him where he is from. The reaction of the boy to Kropinski’s words occasions a second shock wave for the men:

Beim Klang der polnischen Laute steckte das Kind sein Köpfchen vor wie ein Insekt, das die Fühler eingezogen hatte. Eine kleine, erste Lebensäußerung, für die beiden so unerhört erregend, daß sie dem Kind in die Augen starrten. (19)

(At the sound of Polish, the child moved its head forward like a snail that had drawn in its horns. The tiny, initial sign of life was so enormously exciting that they both gazed intently into the child’s eyes«.) (22)

The banned stare is replicated by the child: »Das Kind sah die Männer in stummer Erwartung an. Sie wagten kaum zu atmen«. (19; »The child looked at the men in dumb expectation. They scarcely dared to breathe«, 22). The boy’s mute expectation illustrates Levinas’s point of the appeal of the other to the I, the fact of the other regarding me.

When Höfel joins Pippig and Kropinski, the child is sitting upright in the suitcase, and Kropinski tries to coax him to speak – in vain. While the men are contemplating what best to do with the child, Höfel expresses his worries that the boy might scream and thus draw attention to himself. He warns the boy: »Du darfst nicht schreien, hörst du? Sonst kommt SS«. (21; »You mustn’t scream, you hear? Otherwise SS comes«, 24). At the sound of ›SS‹, the child shows signs of fear, throwing himself back into the suitcase, assuming a foetal position and hiding his face in his hands. The men realize that the child knows what ›SS‹ means and close the suitcase to test whether the boy would remain silent. He does. Pippig opens the suitcase again. A second examination takes place:


Höfel nahm Kropinski das Kind ab und wendete es prüfend hin und her. Beine und Kopf eingezogen und die Händchen an das Gesicht gedrückt, erschien das Kind wie eben dem Mutterleib entrissen oder wie ein Käfer, der sich totstellt. (22)

(The child had not moved. Kropinski lifted it and it hung between his hands like a folded insect. Disconcerted, the three looked at the singular creature.

Höfel took the child from Kropinski and turned it this way and that, to see what it would do. With its legs and head drawn in and its little hands pressed to its face the child looked as if it had just been torn from its mother’s womb, or like a bug playing dead.) (24)

It is interesting to note that the descriptions of the boy range from animal («insect», «bug») to baby imagery («torn from its mother’s womb»), from the exotic or incomprehensible («singular creature») to the neutral denominator «child», from a passive, motionless phenomenon (hanging from Kropinski’s hands) to one whose behaviour indicates understanding (feigning death). This breadth of descriptors mirrors the scale of responses to the child. Red Kapo Höfel, who is in
charge of the personal effects room where the boy is hidden, is reflecting on his duty to the child; in doing so, he contrasts the ›normal‹ moral obligation one would have to protect a child with the very different situation in the camp:

Mußte er das Winzige nicht davor bewahren, ausgetreten zu werden?
Höfel blieb stehen und blickte auf die naßglänzenden Steine zu seinen Füßen. Auf der ganzen Welt konnte es nichts geben, was selbstverständlicher war.
Auf der ganzen Welt!
Nicht aber hier! (29)

(Shouldn’t he protect the tiny thing from being stamped out?
Höfel stood still and looked at the wet stones glistening at his feet. There could be nothing in the whole world that was more natural.
In the whole world!
But not here!) (31)

Höfel belongs to the camp’s communist resistance group, the ILK, which is planning an insurrection; he himself has been secretly training comrades how to use the few weapons that had found their way into the group’s possession. It is essential that the SS never become suspicious about Höfel – they might torture him, he might reveal crucial information and endanger his comrades. If the child were to be found and a connection made to Höfel, his fate would be sealed. This is why Höfel feels so conflicted. In an argument with party-member and ILK-leader Bochow who wants to see the child deported on the next available transport, Höfel shouts: »Mensch, Herbert, hast du denn kein Herz im Leib«? (30; »Herbert! Haven’t you any heart in your body«? 32). Bochow says: »Manchmal ist das Herz ein sehr gefährliches Ding«! (31; »Sometimes the heart is a very dangerous thing«! 33). Höfel grudgingly agrees to get rid of the child, as it seems the sensible thing to do. His deliberations betray the juxtaposition of emotion and ethics on the one hand, and of reason and rationality on the other:

Das Kind einfach versteckt halten..., raunte es in ihm wieder. Er öffnete die Augen. Hatte er eigentlich kühl und klar gehandelt? Er war dem Trieb des Herzens gefolgt und hatte sich von ihm überrumpeln lassen. War das Herz stärker als der Verstand?
Fühlen – denken. Denken – fühlen. . . (91)

(Simply keep the child hidden, went the murmur inside him. He opened his eyes. Had he, in fact, acted coolly and clearly? He had followed the urging of his heart and let it take him unawares. Was the heart stronger than the brain?
Feeling – thinking. Thinking – feeling...) (95)

In the event, Höfel defies the decision to send the child away, and the boy remains in the camp. What is initially perceived as an objectionable, annoying »Disziplinbruch« (96f.; »breach of discipline«, 100) of Höfel’s by the camp elder Krämer becomes their secret project. They decide not to tell Bochow the truth about the child and to move the boy from the personal effects room to the barrack for contagious diseases in the Little Camp in order to prevent the boy from being discovered by the SS, one of whom – Scharführer Zweiling – has already spotted the child and wants to use him as a pawn should he have to defend himself after
the war. Relocating Stepan becomes a challenge, testing the men’s courage and cunning. The plan is for Höfel, Kropinski and Pippig to snatch the boy from the first hiding place, wrap him up in a sack, abseil him through the chimney into the basement of the building, from where he is to be carried to the sick block. Höfel suffers silently as the rope cuts into his arm when he lowers Stepan into the chimney. After the boy emerges at the other end, Pippig sighs: »Das war die reinste Zangengeburt« (118; »Was that ever a high-forceps delivery!« 121), and the child is very upset. With Höfel’s pain akin to that of a woman giving birth, the child is reborn here, as a being who will from now on not just be protected instinctively, spontaneously and almost accidentally, but intentionally and strategically. The men assume control of the situation. This is why, when they liberate the boy from the sack in the Seuchenbaracke, they can all smile at him, reassure him, and nurse Zidkowski picks up the child »mit väterlichen Händen« (120; »with paternal hands«, 124), a gesture which promises protection.

From this second hiding-place, Stepan will be moved again – on the personal initiative of the Russian Bogorski, who gets a young Red Army soldier to hide the child in the pig-sty. For the Nazis arrest Höfel, Kropinski and later on some ten other men, allegedly because they are after the child, but in reality because they suspect an illegal resistance group operating in the camp. Due to Bogorski’s move, only he and the young soldier know of the boy’s whereabouts. The warm, fatherly, protective, morally »right« instincts of those who help hide the child without fear for their own safety – whether party members or not – is contrasted with Krämer’s and especially Bochow’s hardline rationality. Not only has Bogorski taken responsibility for the child, he also gives his comrades a piece of his mind when they fear for their safety and that of the movement, with Höfel and Kropinski being tortured in the infamous »bunker:"

(Mistakes, guilt, curses at the child and the comrades! Was this the way Communists dealt with a dangerous situation? Was the situation to rule us? Or wasn’t it rather the job of a Communist to be master of the situation? […] Isn’t it, after all, our own child, now that two comrades have had to go to the bunker for its sake? Wouldn’t it be the job of the ILK to place the child under its protection? (189f.)

Eventually, Bochow realizes the error of his ways and accuses himself of having been a bad comrade for having silenced his heart:

weiß ich, daß ich ein schlechter Genosse bin, weiß ich, wie groß wir sind in unserer Erniedrigung, weiß ich, daß Höfel und Kropinski stärker sind als der Tod. (290)

(I have to tell you this, you ought to know it! You ought to know that I was arrogant. Conceited about the superiority of my own mind. Bumptiousness, that’s what it was, and callousness – soulless callousness! Since that child has been in the camp and more and more people have shielded it with their hearts, like a wall... and no Kluttig or Reineboth has been able to break through the wall, I know that I am a poor comrade, I know how great we are in our debasement, I know that Höfel and Kropinski are stronger than death. (291)

The solidarity with the child in need, this act of defiance, changes the tactics of the entire organization. When the Nazis pretend they want to let 46 inmates go, only planning to execute these suspected communists outside the camp, Bochow decides not to give any of them up. Rather than avoiding danger, as they had to as prisoners, Bochow now wants the men to resist openly:

Dem Häftling war es erlaubt, die Gefahr zu umgehen. Der Mensch hat nur einen Weg, und der führt geradeaus, mitten auf die Gefahr zu! Das sei unser Wille und unser Stolz. [...] Finden sie auch nur einen einzigen, dann muß er verteidigt werden, wenn es gilt, mit der Waffe! Das sei Beschluß! Dann aber beginnt der Aufstand. Freiheit oder Tod! [...] Beschließen wir den Aufstand? (291f.)

(The prisoner was permitted to circumvent danger. There is only one way for the human being, and that leads straight on into the midst of danger! That is our will and or pride [...] If they find just one, then he has to be defended, with weapons if necessary! Let that be the decision! But then the revolt begins. Freedom or death! [...] Do we decide for revolt? (293; emphasis in the original)

At the next roll-call, the 46 inmates are ›missing‹. They have been hidden, just like the child. In view of both the impending evacuation of the camp and the order to arrange for a transport of 10,000 men, Krämer gets Bochow to find the child: »Zuviel schon hat uns das Wurm gekostet. Nun soll es bei uns sein, wie die anderen auch, wie Höfel, Kropinski, die 46, du, ich... Es soll mit uns marschieren oder mit uns verrecken. Aber es soll här! (357; »That little thing has cost us too much already. Now let it be one of us like others, like Höfel, Kropinski, the 46, Pippig, you, me... It should march with us or die with us. But we’ve got to get it here! 360). Bogorski leads them to a pigsty where they find the boy, alive but filthy – associations with baby Jesus in the manger are not too far-fetched. Krämer says: »Seht zu, daß ihr aus dem da wieder einen Menschen macht...« (372; »See that you make a human being out of it again...«, 375), and so the child is kitted out with a typical camp outfit and is presented as »unser jüngster Kumpel«! (379; »our youngest comrade«! 383). When the camp is finally liberated, Kropowski grabs the child, holds him high up over his head and runs out of the gate with him:

Einer Nußschale gleich schaukelte das Kind über den wogenden Köpfen. Im Gestau quirlte es durch die Enge des Tores, und dann riß es der Strom auf seinen befreiten Wellen mit sich dahin, der nicht mehr zu halten war. (409)
(The child bobbed like a nutshell above the surging heads. It twirled in the eddy through the narrows of the gate. The current swept it along on its liberated billows, which were no longer restrained). (413)

The child, who had remained silent throughout the book, now screams from the top of his lungs – like a newborn baby. He symbolizes the birth of the communist future.

The boy acts initially as a reminder of the primary importance of human values over political goals, and then these two are united in a second step, thus humanizing the political. The men accept responsibility for the infant not because of a clucky, sentimental instinct but because their response gives them agency and illustrates their moral integrity. The relevant programmatic sentence reads: »Ein Mensch, der Anspruch erhebt, diesen Namen zu tragen, muß sich in all seinem Tun stets für die höhere Pflicht entscheiden« (144; »A human being – who claims the right to that name – must always, in everything that he does, decide for the greater duty«, 147). The ‘greater duty‘ is not to any political party or organization but to a primary humanistic principle, which, when done, – reassuringly – wins out even against the Nazi thugs.

Apart from the ideologically motivated identification of communist ideology with humanistic ideals, the novel stresses the importance of uniting individuals in a group, and the group behind agreed values. Moral attitude and practice function as guarantors of a strong community, which turns out to be vital for the fate of the entire camp whose liberation Apitz has brought about by the united comrades. 52

The process by which the men unite behind the child is twofold: some get on board due to their confrontation with the boy, others through debate. Debating the right course of action implies the freedom to choose, which understates the fact of the men’s lack of freedom as prisoners. Both the fact of choice and the choices themselves are important in the emancipatory development by virtue of which responsibility for the outcome of the decisions taken is accepted: once the decision to take arms against the Nazis has been taken, the possibility of harm, injury, even loss of life is seen not just as a danger but as a consequence of a decision taken voluntarily and democratically in the group. Scanlon argues that people generally want »to have what happens depend on the way that they respond when presented with alternatives under the right conditions«. 53 He distinguishes between three types of values of choice: firstly the instrumental one, whereby the choice made is »instrumental to my own future enjoyment« or »satisfaction« (e.g. ordering a dish that one knows to be good in a given restaurant), secondly the representative one, whereby a choice serves to express one’s own

52 This ending is an obvious departure from historical truth: it was the advance of the American forces which caused the SS to abandon the camp on 11 April 1945, followed by other camp personnel such as the guards in the watchtowers. The prisoners were simply left behind, waiting for the American troops to arrive. Cf. Niven: The Buchenwald Child (ref. 13), 32.

53 Scanlon: What We Owe to Each Other (ref. 8), 251.
tastes or affections (e.g. choosing a gift for a friend), and thirdly the symbolic value of choice, whereby the fact of making a choice on a certain matter reflects social expectations (e.g. choosing one’s partner). All three types inform Bogor-ski’s quoted appeal to protect the child, an address aimed at uniting the comrades on the basis of a set of shared values which include being in control of the situation and choosing a path that will serve to help the child (instrumental choice), represent a course of action appropriate to communism (representative choice), and demonstrate defiance of the Nazis (symbolic value). In all the cited examples, responsibilities are negotiated. Bochow’s self-reproach and turn-around is grounded in his realization that his self-governance was faulty, that he should have judged better. His rhetoric is interesting because of its utopian character: it is as if freedom was already tangible. The men imagine acting as free men, and their value system – as illustrated in their response to the child – reflects that of free men who can and do choose what is morally right, and this choice becomes the rational one. The reassuring message of the book is that moral motivation is rationally grounded, and that the demands of rational choice do not conflict with those of morality.

3.2. Irrational Ethics: Hilsenrath’s Nacht

By contrast, Hilsenrath’s Nacht offers no such equation of the ethical with the rational – on the contrary, altruism appears as a kind of quaint luxury, out of place and even potentially detrimental to the chances of the do-gooder to survive. »Heute muß jeder zuerst an sich selbst denken«, the central character, 26-year-old Ranek, says, »es ist das Gesetz unserer Zeit« (»Nowadays everybody has to think of himself first. […] That’s the law of our time«). Where Nackt unter Wölfen portrays solidarity with others and community grounded in shared (political and ethical) values as a route to survival, even leading to successful agency in the political process, Nacht features volatile groupings of diverse people who share nothing but the fate that brought them to the ghetto Prokov and their desperate struggle for survival amid hunger, cold, squalor, violence and illness. The plot is not so much organized around an overarching storyline (except that it follows Ranek’s fate to his death) but is structured by episodes revolving around procurement and trade: money buys everything but is in short supply so that a bartering economy has developed in which clothes are traded for shelter, sexual favours for help or work, information for cigarettes, and everything for food. Where Apitz shows two clearly distinct groups – the Nazis and the camp prisoners –, Hilsenrath eclipses the German Nazis from the narrated world where the only tangible enemy of the Jews in Prokov are local policemen and soldiers. Despite police raids, deportations and executions, the focus is firmly on the everyday struggle for

54 Ibid. 252f.
survival of the Jewish ghetto population. Here, selfishness prevails: there is no sense in which the strong(er) protect the weak – support is almost exclusively limited to the family context, and even here, it is not a given. While in Apitz’s novel, the rights and neediness of the weak other – the child – are acknowledged and responsibility is taken on as a result, a challenge which in turn unites the men more strongly, the characters in Nacht remain individuals who stand more or less alone, whether they have adopted a humanitarian goal of helping somebody else or not. It is not as if they had no ethical impulses, but they often cannot or will not act on them, or they fail in their efforts to help, because any helping hand can only ever provide momentary relief. Acting morally and taking on responsibility is thus a haphazard, fragile, rare phenomenon, an unpredictable occurrence. This can be illustrated by looking at some situations which confront the characters with accepting, ignoring or rejecting responsibility for somebody else. Responsibilities are negotiated between the living and the dead, between adults, or between adults and children, and the social relationships of these encounters range from that of strangers to friends and family members, a set-up which provides a broad scale for ethical reflection and decision-taking.

Thus, the opening scene shows Ranek address his deceased friend Nathan, asking him for a final favour – his hat as well as the rags and threads he is wearing in lieu of shoes – and pleading for his understanding:

›Nathan‹, sagte er heiser, ›ich muß dich um einen letzten Gefallen bitten‹. […] Nathan war sein bester Freund gewesen, und es war nur zu natürlich, daß er ihn beerbte. Bevor er ging, nahm er den Hut des Toten und stülpte ihn sich auf den Kopf, während er seinen alten achtlos auf den Boden fallen ließ.

›Sei nicht böß, Nathan‹, sagte er, ›sei nicht böß, daß ich auch den Hut …, aber meiner ist nicht mehr wasserdicht‹. (10)

(Nathan had been his best friend and it was only natural that he should be his heir. Before leaving he picked up the dead man’s hat and crammed it on his head, letting his own battered hat drop to the floor.

›Don’t be angry, Nathan‹, he said, ›don’t be angry that I also took the hat … but mine wasn’t waterproof any more.‹ (10)

Ranek shows his respect for the dead man by explaining why he has to take what he takes, by imploring him not to be cross, and his hoarse voice betrays his sadness. That the men were friends is given as a good reason for Ranek to take Nathan’s belongings. Etiquette and custom would normally require that the dead be buried, and only then questions of inheritance would be raised, but in the ghetto, this is out of the question, which illustrates right at the beginning of the novel that there is a gulf between ethical paradigms and practices inside the ghetto and in the outside world. The fact that Ranek leaves Nathan’s body to decompose together with the other corpses in the room shows that he cannot take on the responsibility of giving his friend a funeral; the last rite is not a (religious or cultural) ritual but a transaction of goods.
Between adults, egotism and an ethics of exchange informs encounters. When Ranek enters the stairwell of the Nachtasyl in search for a bed for the night, he stumbles across Levi, a man sick with typhoid who had been thrown out by the other inhabitants of the house for fear of getting infected. Ranek hides the man under the stairs and shelters him from view. This seemingly selfless act is no such thing:

Der Kranke tat Ranek nicht leid; es war bloß ein alltäglicher Fall. Trotzdem wollte er ihm irgendwie behilflich sein, um ihn wenigstens vor der Verschleppung zu retten. Auch dies war keine Sentimentalität; Ranek beabsichtigte hiermit bloß, den Gewinn zurückzuzahlen, den er im Begriffe war, aus der Lage des Mannes zu ziehen. Das war nur fair. Er machte selten unfaire Sache; nur dann, wenn es nicht anders ging. (27)

(Ranek did not feel sorry for the invalid; he was an everyday case. Still, he wanted to be helpful in some way, at least so that he would not be taken away in a raid. This was not a sentimental trick, either. Ranek only wanted to repay the man in some form for the profit he was about to derive from his situation. That was only fair. He rarely did something unfair; only when he had no choice.) (23f.)

After having helped Levi, Ranek takes his place in the Nachtasyl, and once Levi’s death seems imminent to Ranek, he steals his shoes to trade them for food. The scene shows that the ghetto is not devoid of ethical principles – but the rules are different to those of the outside world, where theft itself is sanctioned. In Prokov, stealing is necessary for survival, although plundering a dying man is considered a »schweres Verbrechen« (68; »serious crime«, 57), a fact which makes Ranek feel like a »Geier vor einem Aas« (68; »vulture in front of a carcass«, 57). Ranek’s deliberations and pangs of conscience show that he is not a cynic for whom there is »only one law – the law of survival«, as Peter Stenberg would have it. Ethical concerns do still play a role when deciding on a course of action, but pragmatism wins: when faced with starvation, the rational choice – »das Wichtigste« (69; »the most important thing«, 57) – is the one that serves self-preservation.

This conflict between the ethical and the pragmatic or rational is particularly acute when it informs encounters or relationships which are traditionally associated with a strong element of ethical practice: friendship, the family, and adult-child-interactions. The family, that nucleus of civilized society, is no longer a guarantor of mutual support; where such support is given, it often comes at a high cost. Thus old Mrs Levi, for want of money, pays for her son’s body to be disposed of by offering sexual services to the two Ukrainian gravediggers. Sigi explains:

›Ich stand dabei, als die Alte mit den Trägern verhandelte«, sagte Sigi, ›... nicht nur ich, die meisten Leute, die jetzt hier sind, waren dabei. Die Alte sagte, daß sie nicht zahlen kann. Die Träger sagten: ›Entweder Geld, oder sie soll mit ihnen in die Büsche gehen. Die Alte sagte: ›Dann eben in die Büsche...‹ Wir sind alle mitgegangen. Die Träger

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...haben sie dort gehört. Die Alte hat wie ‹ne Sau geschrien, aber sie hat durchgehalten›. [...] ›Die Alte wollte nicht, daß ihr Sohn hier tagelang rumliegt‹, sagte er langsam. ›Sie wollte noch etwas für ihn tun‹. (91)

(I was there when the old woman negotiated with the bearers, Sigi said. ›Not only me, most of the people who are here now were there. The old woman said she couldn’t pay. The bearers said, ›Either you pay or you go with us behind the bushes‹. The old woman said, ›Into the bushes, then‹. We all went along. The bearers gave her a good screwing. The old woman screeched like a pig but she stuck it out to the end‹. [...] ›The old woman didn’t want her son to lie around here for days‹, he said slowly. ›She wanted to do one more thing for him‹.) (75)

The rape, a mere spectacle for the bystanders, is seen by Ranek as a sacrifice honouring the woman. In Prokov, only a mother (or other family member) would consider sacrificing something in order to honour the dead, rather than merely robbing them. But this sense of responsibility for a family member is not universal: even Ranek, who is so impressed with the old woman’s deed, later on takes a hammer to his deceased brother’s jaw, because he wants to retrieve the latter’s gold-tooth, and Seidel, a father of three, allows his own brother to starve to death because he prioritizes the well-being of his sons.

Of all relationships, the one between parent and child occupies a privileged position in the novel. Even Moishe, who had forced his wife to work in the brothel where she became pregnant, who hates her unborn child – the »verfluchte Bankert« (212; »the bastard child«, 172) –, who urges the doctor to save his wife rather than the baby during the necessary caesarian section, ends up accepting the newborn baby-boy. At first, he snatches the baby and hastens towards the door of the room, clearly intending to get rid of the child:

Einen Augenblick lang schließen sich seine Finger gehässig um die Gurgel des Bankerts. Aber dann öffnen sie sich wieder ... so langsam wie aus einem Krampf. ›Ich kann’s nicht‹, murmelt er vor sich hin, ›ich kann’s einfach nicht; diese kleine Mißgeburt ist nun einmal da, was kann man da machen‹. (389)

For a moment his fingers closed with hatred around the bastard’s throat. But then they unfolded again ... as slowly as after cramp. ›I can’t do it‹, he murmured to himself, ›I just can’t do it. This little monster is here now, what’s there to do‹. (317)

A little later, the nurse observes that Moishe gingerly picks up the baby, lies down next to his wife and caresses the baby time and again. This is not merely an emotional reaction; it also indicates that he acknowledges the responsibilities of fatherhood once he is faced with the baby’s needy presence – the primordial instinct of regarding the other and responding ethically towards him makes itself felt.

This baby becomes a major opportunity to foreground one character’s remarkable selflessness and righteousness: that of Deborah, Ranek’s beloved, saint-like sister-in-law, who comes across as a »Relikt aus besseren Tagen« (relic of better days).57 For once the boy’s mother has been deported, Deborah takes on the daily

57 Werner: Edgar Hilsenraths Roman Nachz (ref. 46), 37.
care for the infant, supported by Moishe. Ranek observes the two of them talking quietly to each other: »Wahrscheinlich sprachen sie über das Baby, denn sie tätschelten es andauernd und lächelten« (572; »They were probably talking about the baby – they were fondling it constantly and smiling«. 467). In this scene, the two adults appear like parents sharing the joy of having a child. On his deathbed, Moishe implores Deborah to take care of the boy, which she does, much to Ranek’s frustration who fails to see any »praktischen Wert« (605; »practical value«, 493) in her carrying the baby through the ghetto after they have left the now typhoid-infested Nachtasyl in search for a new shelter. Old Mrs Levi asks Deborah why she does not just abandon the child to maximize the chances of her own survival. Ironically, the woman who had earlier given herself to the two bearers so as to get her son’s body carted off, here preaches egotism und utilitarianism. But Deborah remains steadfast. The novel ends with her reassuring the baby:

Debora drückte das Kind fester an sich, als fürchte sie, es zu verlieren. ›Wir werden jetzt in den Bordellhof gehen‹, sagte sie zu dem Kind. ›Und dort werden wir uns wieder auf die Kellertreppe setzen. Man wird uns nicht fortjagen, so wie man ihn [i.e. Ranek; B.M.] fortgejagt hat. Wir beide sind doch gesund! Heut nacht wird es nicht sehr kalt sein, und morgen früh werden wir ein besseres Quartier suchen. Du brauchst keine Angst zu haben. Wir werden bestimmt etwas finden. Und ich werde auch etwas zu essen auftreiben‹. Debora lächelte. ›Du brauchst keine Angst zu haben‹, sagte sie wieder. ›Mutter wird auf dich aufpassen‹. (632)

(Deborah pressed the child more tightly to her bosom as though afraid she might suddenly lose it. ›We’ll go to the brothel yard‹, she said to the child. ›And there we’ll sit down on the cellar steps. They won’t chase us away as they chased him [i.e. Ranek; B.M.]. We’re still healthy, the two of us! It won’t get very cold tonight and tomorrow morning we’ll look for a better place. You don’t need to be afraid. We’re sure to find something. And I’ll get us something to eat‹. Deborah smiled. ›You don’t need to be afraid‹, she repeated. ›Mother will watch over you‹. (514f.)

Deborah addresses all the primary functions of maternal protection: the provision of shelter, food, psychological reassurance and future care. She decides to take on responsibility for the child. The scene quotes the madonna with child, thus introducing an element and symbol of hope in the otherwise dire world of this ghetto.58

While Deborah is clearly the most salient example of a person who consistently safeguards ethical principles and acts accordingly, there are other instances where adults, especially when faced with children in need, make morally right choices. Interestingly, almost all the adult characters in the novel who help children are

58 It has been observed that Deborah functions as a contrast to the other characters in the novel in that she represents an unabatedly, uncompromisingly good person with firm moral principles. Marika Kreutz claims that Deborah serves to demonstrate alternative forms of behaviour. Cf. Marika Kreutz: Täter und Opfer. Das Bild des Juden in den Romanen »Nacht« und »Der Nazi & der Friseur«. In: Thomas Kraft (ed.): Edgar Hilsenrath: Das Unerzählbare erzählen. Munich: Piper 1996, 127–135, here 130.
female. Thus, when some drunken soldiers abduct eight-year old Ljuba to rape her in the nearby brothel, the prostitutes intervene and fight to stop them, reports her twelve-year old brother Mischa, the streetwise cigarette-boy. However, this sort of help is rendered only occasionally, as it is not born of a habitual, judgment-sensitive attitude, as Scanlon would put it, but is situation-specific. Ranek’s behaviour illustrates the volatility of such encounters: he who at one point lovingly wants to caress the head of a beggar’s infant, also steals and eats the kohl-rabi dummy of Dvorsky’s baby, as well as snatching away little Stella’s bowl of soup when her mother has to disappear behind a nearby wall:

Was dann geschah, war etwas, was gar nicht in seiner Absicht stand. Zwar wußte er, daß die Frau hinter der Mauer hockte und dort ihre Notdurft verrichtete und daß das Kind in diesem Augenblick allein und wehrlos war, aber schließlich war er nicht hierhergekommen, um das Kind zu bestehlen; er wollte doch mit der Frau ein Geschäft abschließen … bestimmt wollte er nichts weiter, als eben dieses Geschäft abschließen, aber als er jetzt die Suppe in greifbarer Nähe vor sich sah, da konnte er sich nicht mehr beherrschen. Er riß dem Kind die Schüssel aus den Händen. Und er fing mit Heißhunger zu essen an. Die Frau steckte den Kopf hinter der Mauer hervor, aber offenbar war sie in einer Verfassung, in der sie dem Kind nicht sofort zu Hilfe eilen konnte, denn es dauerte eine geraume Weile, bis sie endlich zum Vorschein kam. Ranek glaubte erst, daß sie nun wie eine Wahnsinnige auf ihn zustürzen würde, aber er hatte sich getäuscht. Sie ging langsam auf ihn zu und nahm ihm die leergegessene Schüssel weg. Dann nahm sie das Kind an der Hand und sagte: ›Gott wird Sie dafür bestrafen‹. 

›Ich schieß auf Gott‹, sagte er.

›Das Kind hat heut noch nichts gegessen‹, sagte sie. ›Wissen Sie überhaupt, was Sie gemacht haben‹?


Aber statt dessen sagte er: ›Heut früh hab ich Ihren Mann zurück auf die Bank gelegt, und Sie haben mir nichts dafür gegeben. Jetzt sind wir quitt‹. (505)

(What happened then was something he had not intended at all. Although he knew that the woman was squatting behind the wall relieving herself, and that the child was alone and defenceless at the moment, he had not come here to steal from the child; he just wanted to make a deal with the woman… no, certainly he did not want anything else but to complete this deal when he saw the soup within his reach – and he lost all control over himself. He tore the bowl out of the child’s hands and gorged down the soup. The child bawled. The woman stuck her head out from behind the wall, but evidently she was in no position to rush to her child’s help. It was some time before she appeared. Ranek thought she would leap upon him like a madwoman, but he was wrong. She walked slowly up to him and took the empty bowl out of his hand. Then she grasped the child’s hand and said, ›God will punish you for that‹. [To hell with God‹, he said.]59 Then she added, ›The child hasn’t eaten anything today. Do you have any idea what you’ve done?‹ He wanted to reply, Now I know it. But before, when I did it, I had no idea. I couldn’t help it. But instead he said, ›This morning I helped you put your husband back on the bench and you didn’t give me anything for that. Now we are quits‹. (412)

59 This line is missing from the English translation.
Beate Müller

Ranek’s theft, although clearly born of desperation and not evil design, is nevertheless shown to be morally wrong, as is his refusal to show remorse. Ranek himself knows it too, which makes him guilty, at least to some extent — and this leaves the reader feeling ambivalent about the man. This mixed response to the narrated adult behaviour (not only Ranek’s), oscillating between sympathy and understanding on the one hand, and resentment and indignation on the other, indicates the ethical complexity of the novel, which is structured around issues of agency, responsibility and culpability. In his discussion of what he calls the »situation-determined ethics« prevalent in camps, Lawrence Langer points out that the normal moral frameworks of behaviour which »are built on the premise of individual choice and responsibility for the consequences of choice« were suspended because the prisoners were not in a position to choose freely. One could argue that Ranek’s theft of the girl’s soup was neither intentional nor voluntary because the man was simply overcome by hunger, i.e. the theft represents an instinctual reaction in a situation imposed upon him, rather than a conscious, deliberate decision. It seems to be a case of diminished responsibility. Is Ranek therefore not to blame for his action?

Following Scanlon, I would propose that it is important to differentiate between blameworthiness and responsibility, and that it is necessary to distinguish between attributive and substantive responsibility in order to be able to do so. Holding somebody attributively responsible »for a given action is only to say that it is appropriate to take it as a basis of moral appraisal of that person«. This is the case if the action carried out was »under the control« of the agent’s »judgment-sensitive attitudes«, i.e. the agent was in a position to choose the course of action embarked upon, and there were no mental health problems, no coercion, hypnosis, or any other kind of »factors outside the agent« that caused the action. Being attributably responsible is not the same as being to blame for an action. Thus, so Scanlon argues, a bank clerk who hands over the money to an armed robber is still attributably responsible, and he even acted freely to some extent because in principle he would have had the choice to play the hero; but the employee nevertheless is not to be blamed for his deed because this choice does not represent his judgment-sensitive attitude (i.e. he would not hand over the money unless under duress), nor were there sensible alternative decisions available to him in that situation, and so moral criticism of the clerk’s behaviour would be inappropriate. If we apply this reasoning to Ranek’s theft, taking into account also the protestations that he had had no intention to steal the soup, that he just could not help himself, i.e. he was not in control, we end up exculpating the man on the grounds of his theft having been brought about by forces outside his control.

61 Scanlon: What We Owe to Each Other (ref. 8), 248.
62 Ibid. 277 and 251 respectively.
However, I take it we believe it is wrong to steal food from a starving child, as a matter of principle, irrespective of any mitigating circumstances the thief might have. This leads us to Scanlon’s concept of substantive responsibility, which describes judgments of responsibility in terms of »what people are required […] to do for each other«.63 These evaluations can »express judgments about almost any duty, or at least the duties connected with any role«, but »what is or isn’t a person’s (substantive) responsibility is particularly sensitive to the choices that person makes«.64 In this perspective, Ranek is substantively responsible for the theft – as an adult, he owes the defenseless girl better treatment –, but the conditions of his choice deeply affected the (morally wrong) choice he made: for him, it was quite possibly the choice between his own life and that of the girl.

When he defends his action by pointing to him having helped the girl’s father earlier that day without receiving anything in return, that the bowl of soup was therefore some kind of late payment rather than a wrong, Ranek transposes the issue of moral duty to others to the pane of trade and exchange: good deeds are currency and commodity, rather than constituting a custom or principle governing human encounters in their own right. This illustrates how the world of Prokov and our world operate according to diametrically opposed behavioural frameworks: while we would expect (at least hope) that ethical principles inform human behaviour across the range of relevant spheres of activity, including that of trade and commerce, life in Prokov has displaced the ethics of encounters with the logic of exchange: »what we owe to each other in the literal sense determines human interaction. This very primacy of exchange effectively invalidates traditional ethical concerns by harnessing elements thereof – notions such as fairness – for an unwritten rulebook that then governs the brutal fight for scarce resources, but rather than making this fight more tolerable, the mock-ethics merely exacerbate the inexorable struggle for survival, because they give a rationale, an air of reason, an argument to selfishness and disregard for others. The old-time ethical norms are still remembered, as Ranek’s (quickly suppressed) impulse to apologize for having snatched the soup demonstrates, but they are portrayed as having little bearing on most people’s behaviour in Prokov, because it is simply not sensible to take much heed of one’s moral obligations to others. It is the equation of the ethical with the irrational, and of the unethical with the rational, that makes Nacht such a provocative, disturbing read.

4. Conclusion

That the radically different ethical frameworks underpinning the two novels play a role for their diverging reception becomes evident when reading reviews and scho-

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63 Ibid. 248.
64 Ibid. 248f.
larly work for their moral judgments. Thus, Herting praised *Nackt unter Wölfen* for its depiction of the »Größe und Schönheit des Menschen, der für humane Ziele kämpft und deshalb unüberwindbar ist« (greatness and beauty of man who fights for humane goals and is therefore invincible),65 a verdict that clearly betrays identification with the novel’s ethical project of saving little Stepan. By contrast, Dopheide regards the provocative nature of *Nach* as grounded in its grotesque suspension of the »gewöhnlich geltenden, ethischen und sozialen Normen« (normally valid ethical and social norms); Schachtsiek-Freitag claims that the struggle for survival has turned the people into barbarians, and Elizabeth Debazi speaks of the ghetto as a world in which the laws of civilization have been suspended and demoralization has been brought about.66 While in *Nach*, the *contrat social* is cancelled in that it is no longer binding or normative for human encounters (although it still occupies the place of nostalgic consciousness), *Nackt unter Wölfen* constructs a politically grounded version of the *contrat social*, which is made more palatable by virtue of its piggybacking on established moral tenets: saving a child would seem to constitute a moral absolute.

The ready acceptability of this ethical core that both prescribes permissible responses to a child victim and enshrines his or her victim status, helps account for the popularity of child figures in Holocaust narratives over and above the reasons identified at the beginning of this paper. While it seems a logical enough authorial decision to employ child figures in Holocaust fiction, a device that would seem to enhance the story’s impact on its readership, Mark Anderson is sceptical of the function the figure of the child victim has in Holocaust narratives.67 While it is undoubtedly true, argues Anderson, that the focus on the child as the iconic victim makes a story about the Holocaust more accessible to mainstream audiences, it is precisely the universal appeal of the innocent child victim that depoliticizes and dehistoricizes the victims’ specificity such that they fit in with a universal, existentialist story set within a family context, which in turn shifts the emphasis from complex history and politics to something much simpler that people can identify with.68 One of the examples Anderson cites is the ›Tower of Faces‹, a section of Washington’s Holocaust Museum where numerous photos of a Polish village and its inhabitants, prior to its destruction, are displayed. Anderson regards the foregrounding of the family in this photo exhibition as effectively masking the Jewish, political and professional identities of the victims:

65 Herting: Von der Größe und Schönheit des Menschen (ref. 33), 45.
68 Ibid. 3.
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[Visitors are left with the impression that they have witnessed the personal lives of an entire village that has tragically disappeared. But so have the victims' political and professional identities. There is no attempt to depict, say, the political views of many of these villagers. Communists, socialists, anarchists, Zionists have become fathers and mothers, grandparents and children, human beings in their family identities: people just like us. 69

Anderson sees this emphasis on the child as victim and witness of the Holocaust as linked with commercial success in America, precisely because child identities veil Jewish identities, as the example of Anne Frank shows:

Anne’s identity as a child muted her Jewishness from the very beginning. Unformed, still developing, and then suddenly and tragically dead – Anne could be a Jew to Jewish audiences or simply a courageous girl whose Judaism posed no real obstacle to those who wanted to identify with her ‘existentially’. It was because she was a child that even latent antisemitic American audiences of the 1950s could welcome her into their hearts while continuing to frequent restricted hotels and country clubs. If a bearded Polish rabbi or a wealthy German-Jewish businessman had written a comparable memoir (and many did), would big-name publishers, Broadway producers, and Hollywood moguls have rushed to make their stories known? 70

While Anderson speaks about child victims in the context of an ‘Americanization’ of the Holocaust, the basic principles he has unveiled work outside the US as well, as the recent success of Boyne’s The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas illustrates. And so, what about Nackt unter Wölfen and Nacht? Are child figures in these novels also used to downplay the Jewishness of the victims in favour of a universalizing portrayal of destruction that readers might readily identify with?

In Apitz’s book, this is the case to some extent: Zacharias Jankowski, the man who smuggles the little boy into Buchenwald, is merely described as a Pole, and when he tells his story to some of the other prisoners, the child’s Jewishness is more implied than explicitly thematized. »Er sagen«, Kropinski translates,

|Er sagen|, Kropinski translates,


(He saying he ain’t fadder of child. Fadder dead and mudder also in Auschwitz and gassed. He saying was child tree mont’ old when it come wit fadder and mudder from Varshava ghetto to Auschwitz camp. He saying SS kill all children. Little child always hidden. (55f.)

Of course, the references to the Warsaw ghetto and to the death of the boy’s parents in the gas chambers indirectly identify the boy as Jewish, but in this scene, the emphasis quickly shifts from the boy’s ethnic origins to his life in hiding and to how he has learnt to stay silent to evade discovery by the Nazis. The only time the toddler is explicitly referred to as Jewish is when Höfel tries to defend the

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69 Ibid. 15.
70 Ibid. 4 (emphasis in the original).
initially planned deportation of the boy to Kropinski. Kropinski emphasizes the defenselessness of the child in order to persuade Höfel to have mercy by drawing his attention to the infant’s beautiful eyes and to how small his nose, his ears and his hands are. Höfel tries to fend off his own emotions by calling the boy Jewish: »Jaja, ein kleines polnisches Judenkind...« (76; »Sure sure, a little Polish Jewish child...«, 79). He clearly uses the boy’s Jewishness as a means to distance himself from the child, but Kropinski points out that a child is a child everywhere in the world, regardless of his origin: »Was heißt Kind aus Polen! Kind ist auf der ganzen Welt überall! Man muß liebhaben und beschützen« (76; »What means child from Poland! Child is in whole world, everywhere. We must love child and take care of him«, 79). Interestingly, Kropinski does not react to the notion of Jewishness that Höfel has foregrounded; he just mentions the geographical origin of the child (which is also his own). Once the men have taken responsibility for the boy, his Jewishness is completely ignored; in fact, in the end Bochow describes him as ›one of us‹. And ›us‹ refers here to the international group of communists; none of them is identified as being Jewish. As Apitz only briefly refers to Stepan as Jewish but describes other prisoners in terms of their nationality and politics only, the story becomes one of an international ›team‹ of non-Jewish men, most of them German communists, saving a boy who is absorbed into their community through the care bestowed upon him, which makes it possible for him to become a symbol of a better (communist) future. With regard to this book, Anderson’s thesis of the appeal of the universal child holds true in so far as the boy is transformed from a Jewish into a symbolic child. But it is worth pointing out that the adult victims are portrayed as even less Jewish than the boy, which means that the falsification of the Jewish specificity of the Nazis‘ victims applies to the men more than to the child. This has the effect of transferring both victim and hero status onto the German communists, as Niven points out: »In Naked among Wolves, it is not the Jews who are seen to suffer, but Germans – for a Jew. Resistance and victimhood reside with Pippig, Höfel, and Krämer«.  

Where Nackt unter Wölfen marginalizes, even eclipses the historical truth that most of the people interned at Buchenwald would have been Jewish, Nacht clearly establishes the Jewish identity of the Nazis’ victims in Prokov. The implicit ethnic distinction between Stepan and his saviours, between child and adult, between Jew and non-Jew, is not a demarcation that informs Nacht in any way. Here, everybody is Jewish – men, women and children alike and, by and large, they share the same fate. Just a few sentences into the novel, Ranek is fumbling around nervously with his coat, at the spot »wo der schmutziggelbe Judenstern hing« (9; »to which the yellow star of David was affixed«, 9). Two pages later, the ghetto’s inhabitants are identified as being mainly deported Rumanian Jews, as well as some remaining local Jews. When Ranek initiates Sara, newly arrived from Czernowitz, into the life in Prokov, Sara says that she was told that »in Prokow geht’s den Juden...«

71 Niven: The Buchenwald Child (ref. 13), 142 (emphasis in the original).
verhält nismäßig gut« (40; »the Jews are comparatively well off in Prokov«, 34). Ranek tells Sara that he is from Litesti, a small town in southern Rumania that was called a Jewish town because the majority of its citizens were Jews. Beyond these opening chapters, the Jewishness of Prokov’s inhabitants is no longer explicitly thematized. Many of the characters have Jewish names, such as Moishe, Blum, Rosenberg, Levi or Itzig, but there are also those with non-Jewish names such as Dvorsky, Hofer, Sigi or Betti, and some who have no names at all such as Red, the cobbler or the hairdresser; of the children, only Stella, Mischa and Ljuba are named. Jewish holidays and traditions are no longer part of life, hence no such markers are used. Thus, Jewishness is not foregrounded in the course of the novel. But as the Jewish identity of the people trapped in Prokov is pointed out several times at the beginning, there is no need to keep repeating the fact that the ghetto’s inhabitants are Jewish. Their Jewishness is no longer important – it only had a fatal, distinguishing value prior to their existence in Prokov, as it led to them being deported to the ghetto, but deportation to Prokov is extradiegetic in that it is merely a remembered past, rather than a narrated present occurrence. In contrast to Apitz who had political motives for idealizing the red Kapos and eclipsing the Jewishness of the Buchenwald prisoners, Hilsenrath is merely realistic when seemingly losing sight of the Jewishness of Prokov’s inhabitants, because Jewishness itself has become a luxury in his narrated world: who cares about kosher food when the hunger is so extreme that potato peelings, a kohlrabi dummy tasting of urine and a dog are being devoured? Therefore, in Nacht, the absence of Jewish customs and specificities indicates the enormous extent of the depravation the Jews have suffered, which includes the loss of their cultural identity, rather than pointing to a ploy aimed at denying the Jewish victims their true identity in favour of peddling a cheap universalizing triviality. The lack of visible Jewishness in Nacht demonstrates the Jews’ degeneration towards dehumanization, a transformation which Hannah Arendt has described as lying at the heart of totalitarianism, as Dana Villa explains: »The ultimate goal of totalitarian power […] was to transform human beings into something subhuman«.72

According to Arendt, this totalitarian experiment first stripped people of their legal rights, and then destroyed their moral fibre, »murdering« the moral person by making death itself anonymous so as to obliterate any sign of the victim’s very existence, and by rendering decisions of conscience impossible in living conditions and situations which no longer offered the alternative between right and wrong, or good and evil, but confronted the individual with a moral impasse whichever way he turned. Arendt cites an example given by Camus, namely the case with the Greek woman whom the Nazis told to choose which of her three children should be killed. For Arendt, the creation of living conditions in which no good can be done any more is a step towards the abolition of all individuality and spontaneity,

towards the production of a bundle of reactions whereby everybody reacts in the same way, like a puppet:

[T]o destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man’s power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events. […] Nothing then remains but ghastly marionettes with human faces, which all behave like the dog in Pavlov’s experiments, which all react with perfect reliability even when going to their own death, and which do nothing but react. This is the real triumph of the system. […] Pavlov’s dog, the human specimen reduced to the most elementary reactions, the bundle of reactions that can always be liquidated and replaced by other bundles of reactions that behave in exactly the same way, is the model ›citizen‹ of a totalitarian state.73

Whatever the merits of Arendt’s analysis, it is clear that historical philosophy is different from literary practice. Despite the substantial differences between Nackt unter Wölfen and Nacht, they are comparable in one respect: in their – possibly utopian – insistence that there is scope for human agency and for ethical decisions even in ghettos and camps. Apitz and Hilsenrath have used child figures to create opportunities for adult characters to respond to moral dilemmas, and it is this catalytic function of the child figures that is more significant than their potential as generic, iconic figures of suffering in the service of what Norman Finkelstein has polemically termed the Holocaust ›industry‹.74