Human, All Too Human: Thomas Berger’s *Crazy in Berlin*

After Thomas Berger’s death on 13 July 2014, a week before his ninetieth birthday, the *New York Times* noted that he had “a reputation as an American original, if an unrecognized one.”¹ In 1970 Richard Schickel asserted that Berger possessed “one of the most radical sensibilities now writing novels in this country.”² Ten years later Thomas R. Edwards lamented that “our failure to read and discuss him is a national disgrace.”³ Thanks to the Arthur Penn film starring Dustin Hoffman, *Little Big Man*, a classic of Western fiction, remains his best known work, but the Reinhart tetralogy—*Crazy in Berlin* (1958), *Reinhart in Love* (1962), *Vital Parts* (1970), and *Reinhart’s Women* (1981)—is at least as important an achievement. His 23 novels vary from each other in genre, setting, and style, while sharing what Jonathan Lethem termed “the Berger slant, in which the familiar becomes menacingly absurd or the absurd becomes menacingly familiar.”⁴ In 2003 Lethem wrote that Berger was “one of America’s three or four greatest living novelists.”⁵ Yet despite high praise from a select group of writers and critics who have recognized his genius, Berger’s status as a major American novelist with a distinctive vision is hardly secure. His novels thwart easy reader responses and defy conventional categories, he rarely repeats himself, and fashionable literary criticism has moved on to newer, if not always greener, pastures. His first novel, *Crazy in Berlin*, which raises unsettling questions about the human condition as it dramatizes tragi-comic interactions at the conclusion of World War II, is long overdue for a comprehensive analysis and evaluation.⁶

The novel’s hero, Carlo Reinhart, is part of the occupation of Berlin. His involvement with Jews, Germans, Americans, Communists, and Nazis enables Berger to explore Humanistic
questions of guilt and innocence, good and evil, appearance and reality, hate and love, victims and victimizers. These issues are connected in turn with a related theme of self-reliance and personal integrity as opposed to blind faith in an overarching cause such as Nazism or Communism. The novel exemplifies “the international theme,” where innocence is the currency of exchange to gain experience: Reinhart is the well-intentioned American whose strength, openness, and curiosity are confounded by European guile, complexity, madness, and evil. By the end of the novel, however, these set categories have been deliberately blurred. The bedrock unifying theme is Berger’s shrewd sense of the “human, all too human” way in which people can either help or harm both themselves and others. This phrase, made famous as the title of one of Nietzsche’s better books, suggests that we are all flawed and that there is a disconnect between who we think we are and our actual human nature. *Crazy in Berlin* is an ambitious first novel that explores public and political issues of world importance, while Berger’s later books tend to focus more narrowly on the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. Among other American novels of the period, Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* and William Eastlake’s *Castle Keep* share some of Berger’s highly ironic comic sensibility, but they deal with the absurdities of the war itself not its aftermath.

What brought the author to this impressive debut? Because Berger is not widely known, I want to take a brief look at his background and preparations to write his first novel, as well as the crisis in Berlin immediately following the war. These necessary contexts help to explain the genesis of the book, its thematic resonance, and its depiction of the deranged situation Berger encountered as a young GI.
Thomas Louis Berger, born July 20, 1924, grew up in Lockland, a blue-collar town north of Cincinnati with a substantial German-American community, where he later recalled many people were named “Reinhart.” His grandfather, a butcher, was from Stuttgart and his mother’s family from Schleswig-Holstein. Trained to be a medical technician, in England he “worked as a clerk at headquarters and, when casualties came in, as a litter bearer…. I was not in combat…. I was in harm’s way only when the V-1 buzz bombs and the V-2 supersonic rockets were fired at London from my grandfather’s homeland.” For three months Berger participated in the occupation of Berlin: “I was with the first American troops that entered the city in 1945 and the Russians were there and the place was all gutted.” His experiences served as the foundation for *Crazy in Berlin*, but first came a dozen years of preparation.

Like many GIs after the war, Berger resumed his education, graduating with honors from the University of Cincinnati in 1948 and completing the courses for an M.A. in English at Columbia University without finishing his thesis on George Orwell. The best indicator of Berger’s thinking at the time are the book reviews he wrote in the early 1950s. Clearly, he was contemplating a political novel in the European tradition of Malraux’s *Man’s Fate*, Silone’s *Bread and Wine*, Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, and Orwell’s *1984*. The books Berger wished to emulate were based on “highly subjective” personal experience; each offered “an account of its author’s most intense involvement in a crucial situation” that embodied “the proper moral complex that the novel must arise from.” Berger was in a comparable “crucial situation” during the occupation of Berlin, when World War II had ended and the Cold War had just begun. The challenge would be to dramatize not only the evils of Hitler but also the threat of Stalin: fascism versus communism, the Holocaust versus the Gulag.
Berger reviewed books about concentration camps, the rise of Hitler, and the Russian conquest of Berlin, as well as works on the dilemma of intellectuals in a period of competing totalitarian ideologies. A constant theme in these reviews, as in *Crazy in Berlin*, is the human factor in atrocities: “We have the responsibility to face up to the hard fact that even such obscenities as the Nazis were human beings.” Likewise the Soviet troops, mostly poor peasants, who raped and pillaged their way across Berlin “were at least motivated by human, all-too human appetites: concupiscence and revenge.” Berger was trying to formulate a theory of degrees of evil. The question was how to assign guilt in an age when moral confusion prevailed. Individual actors ought to be held responsible, but “history is not a cashier’s ledger,” not all crimes can be paid for, and the greatest evil was posed by radical ideologies that wanted “to reshape the world and human nature, to make all existence consistent with their own crazy logic.” The rise of totalitarian mass politics threatened to crush individuality and extinguish “the free spirit.” The challenge was to capture the rampant insanity of the world in a novel: “the ultimate politics of the twentieth century...is the real adversary of art, having literalized all of art’s hallucinations. Hitler and Stalin having proved Kafka a naturalist, we go to Trollope and Howells for a sense of the absurd.”

“Politics in the novel,” Stendhal wrote, “is like a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar, yet a thing to which it is not possible to refuse one’s attention.” Writing a political novel, in other words, is inherently disruptive. Berger wanted *Crazy in Berlin* to dramatize the collapse of human meaning in the face of totalitarian terror without losing aesthetic control of his material. He noted that Stendhal in *The Charterhouse of Parma* focused
on “the guy who got lost at the Battle of Waterloo.” Since indirections can go only so far, however, a direct presentation of historical experiences was essential to his grand design. 

*Crazy in Berlin* features key characters telling stories within the story that recount the rise of Hitler, the horrors of Auschwitz, the grim realities of life in the Soviet Union, and the twisted relations between Nazis and Jews in Germany.

Berger wanted to learn how Nazism emerged in a nation with such rich cultural traditions: “I steeped myself in German lore, going as far back as Tacitus’ work on the savage tribes met by the Romans.” He was “especially influenced by German literature, from the *Nibelungenlied* to a collection of short stories entitled *Zwölf Dicter der Genewart*.” He read Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, noting that *Crazy in Berlin* could be entitled *Reinhart’s Wanderjahre* since his novel was, in part, a *Bildungsroman*.

The German author with a lasting impact on Berger’s thought was Nietzsche: “His vision is utterly original, and one cannot understand him unless one puts aside…[commonplace] assumptions.” Since Heraclitus philosophers have placed strife at the center of existence—Hobbes and Hegel, for example, saw warfare as the moving force of history. All of Berger’s novels are centered on forms of one-upmanship—from totalitarian domination to slights at the dinner table. He especially admired Nietzsche’s eloquent prose as well as his contrarian views of how value conflicts shape human nature. Berger shares Nietzsche’s beliefs that life’s truths can be found both on the surface and in the depths of things; that anyone who strives for noble values must contend with “the crowd, the many, the great majority,” whose *naiiseire* (folly, stupidity, silliness) is pervasive; that there is a constant struggle between the will to power of superior individuals and the *ressentment* of the masses; that the major threat of the
modern age—“the great nausea, the will to nothingness, nihilism”—is a product both of totalitarianism and the complicity of people in their own dehumanization. While Nietzsche drives his binary oppositions to extreme lengths, Berger keeps his ironic balance; he knows that everyone, “blond beasts” as well as the “vulgar herd,” have their all too human flaws.\textsuperscript{22}

Most important in terms of Berger’s development was his reading of classic authors. Foremost of these has always been Melville, whose commitment to tell the truth, however appalling, and his lifelong dedication to his craft, in spite of neglect, serve as models. “Proust is my other great master, Balzac and Kafka following closely behind, and of course Dickens was the obvious influence on my first two novels.”\textsuperscript{23} Of contemporary authors Saul Bellow’s The Adventures of Augie March (1953) served as an inspiration to tap the full resources of the American idiom. At this time Berger was “greatly influenced... by the Jewish intellectuals.” He “devoured every issue of Partisan Review,”\textsuperscript{24} and lived in a cultural milieu featuring his Columbia professor Lionel Trilling and other critics such as Alfred Kazin, Philip Rahv, and Irving Howe, whose The Political Novel (1957) analyzed the very books Berger was reading.

Berger began writing Crazy in Berlin “in a straight and direct way”\textsuperscript{25} based on his personal experiences and with an autobiographical protagonist. Like many a first novel, all did not go as smoothly as planned. The crucial breakthrough came when he “got the idea of this character who was a sort of likeable fellow although a bit foolish,” which made the book “more interesting to me.”\textsuperscript{26} Berger decided that his “fiction must never be confused with that existence through which I make my daily slog.... At that point a character named Reinhart appropriated the role: a better man than I, generous where I am mean, kinder, braver, not even afraid to be taken for a fool—unlike me, in my novelist’s cap and bells!... Whatever I am,
Reinhart has the peculiar ability to dramatize what I am not.”\textsuperscript{27} He later told an interviewer that “the only thing my character and I share is an Army serial number and a few facts of early life.”\textsuperscript{28} Nonetheless, Berger became fond of Reinhart and sympathized with his plight, because he was “the kind of guy who would get the worse of it from everybody.”\textsuperscript{29}

The honor of discovering \textit{Crazy in Berlin} goes to Burroughs Mitchell, a senior editor at Scribners, who in his memoir admitted that “the manuscript marked by singularity has always attracted me.” Mitchell recognized that here was the real thing, a genuinely original sensibility: “Thomas Berger’s voice gave notice of a new tone in fiction.” Berger told Mitchell that in his prose he was “slyly aping German syntax.”\textsuperscript{30} In truth, this “Germanic” style is a major strength and an occasional liability: some sentences are too clogged and congested. Yet the novel as a whole is redeemed by Berger’s vision, his blend of high seriousness and low comedy that captures disturbing aspects of human behavior.

The most perceptive review was by Harvey Swados, a gifted novelist himself, who was impressed by Berger’s meditation on “some of the central questions of European identity: What is a German? What is a Jew? Who is guilty for what the former did to the latter?” Swados found it a “mordant and impious” book, which was “hilariously entertaining” while making readers “think and feel” deeply; he admired Berger’s “audacious use” of the American idiom—an engaging mixture of the colloquial, the obscene, the slangy and the poetic—and his steadfastly ironic point of view.” He also noted significant flaws: “the exuberance of language occasionally results in forcing” and the unrelenting irony can produce too much detachment, particularly in the case of Nathan Schild, a Jewish American Soviet agent with whom Reinhart has a complex relationship.\textsuperscript{31} That Berger’s high-octane rhetoric sometimes spins out of control
and that Schild is not an especially vivid character remain, I think, crucial weaknesses that should figure in any critical analysis and final evaluation of Crazy in Berlin.

3

Critics who want to interpret, as well as readers who wish to appreciate, Berger’s novel need to know about conditions in Berlin at the end of the war. President Roosevelt made the decision in April to allow the Russians to take the city.³² As a result the Soviets, to avenge the loss of some 25 million civilians and soldiers, went on a rampage of murders, looting, and the rape of some 100,000 women.³³ The anonymous author of A Woman in Berlin, a diary that Berger reviewed, gave a graphic account of the initial wave of sexual assaults in the spring: “This is probably how the Teutons acted when they sacked Rome, snatching the perfumed Roman ladies.... Being conquered means having salt rubbed in your wounds.” By the summer of 1945 “a new situation” had emerged whereby German women used illicit bartering to survive: “The mass rape is something we are overcoming collectively.... All the women help each other.” Faced with impossible choices, they called upon their famously caustic Berlin wit: “Better a Russki on top than a Yank overhead,” women said, alluding to the Allied bombings that, along with the Soviet shelling, had reduced the city of rubble.³⁴

Thomas Berger’s 1209th General Hospital unit arrived in mid-July. The Americans were stunned by what they saw. “It looked like the end of the world,” Billy Wilder said. “The summer of ’45 was very, very hot.... Thousands of corpses must have lain under the wreckage; the stink in the heat was intolerable.... I found the town mad, depraved, fascinating.”³⁵ Richard Helms recalled: “Desperadoes of every sort—discharged Wehrmacht personnel, Russian deserters, displaced persons, war criminals on the lam, desperate SS survivors—roamed the
ruins.... ‘Turmoil’ is a word that comes repeatedly to mind.”  

The author of A Woman in Berlin felt she was witnessing “a new twilight of the gods” whose message was “Homo homini lupus.... Hunger brings out the wolf in us.” Then came the discovery of the death camps: “The most horrific thing is the order and the thrift: millions of human beings as fertilizer, mattress stuffing, soft soap.... Aeschylus never saw anything like this!”  

Soviet agents were far better prepared than their American counterparts for the game of espionage that played out in Berlin at the start of the Cold War. The Soviets shipped German resources back to Russia and a directorate known as Smersh (Death to Spies) rounded up deserters, defectors, and other “enemies of the people” to be shot or sent to the Gulag. The Americans, with “sublime naiveté,” honored the Clay-Sakolovsky agreement and handed over Russian soldiers in their zone to the Soviets. “The Russians are a nation of stage managers,” American diplomat George Kennan warned, “and the deepest of their convictions is that things are not what they are, but only what they seem.”  

In the summer of 1945 the four zones of occupied Berlin were amorphous, “the streets designated as boundaries had sometimes wholly disappeared, leaving the armies of the victors to collide blindly.” Thus the Berlin that Reinhart enters is already “crazy”: a city steeped in crime and corruption, where betrayal is the rule and confusion reigns among demoralized Germans as well as their sharply divided conquerors.  

The fundamental question facing Europe after the war, Count von Molthe told Kennan, was “how the picture of man can be reestablished in the breast of our fellow citizens.” The magnitude of Nazi evil implied that Germans were, by nature, inhuman monsters. General Eisenhower issued instructions to the American forces to “be just, but firm and distant.... The German people as a whole must have it driven home to them that the whole nation has been
engaged in a lawless conspiracy against the decencies of western civilization.” In U. S. Army conduct guides the GIs were told: “Germans have sinned against the laws of humanity and cannot come back into the civilized fold by sticking out their hands and saying, ‘I’m sorry.’” The soldiers were forbidden to associate with the population: “Don’t be misled into thinking of Germans, ‘Oh well, they’re human.’ So is a murderer, so is a cannibal… Don’t fraternize.”

The no fraternizing policy was a failure from the start. By a process Petra Goedde termed “the feminization of fraternization,” German women and American GIs saw a great deal of each other. Many women “used their bodies as bargaining chips,” a few “sent their teenage daughters” into American areas “to obtain food or cigarettes in exchange for sex.” “The women of Berlin are hungry, cold, and lonesome,” one contemporary noted. Whether the soldiers took unfair advantage of desperate women already traumatized by the war and its aftermath, or were overcome by sophisticated feminine wiles, both patriarchal versions suggest that human, all too human forces were at work. Soon GIs were boasting that they were “going frattin’” and venereal disease rates soared as did illegitimate births.

The bitter irony was that the GIs liked Germans better than certain allies: “Hell, these people are cleaner and a damn sight friendlier than the frogs [French]. They’re our kind of people.” And the past was best forgotten. “No one is a Nazi. No one ever was,” Martha Gellhorn wryly noted. “It should, we feel, be set to music.” Given that GIs, after years of hard combat, had little interest in making moral judgments, what happened was not surprising. Most soldiers simply wanted to have a good time as they completed their tour of duty. “I think this non-fraternization is just plain stupid,” one said. “What I mean is, it’s going against human nature.” Another reiterated the dominant feeling: “You can’t put love on a political basis. It’s
nature…. I’m going to have my Trudy.”

The statements of these soldiers aptly anticipate, as we shall soon see, Reinhart’s “fraternizing” with two German women, Lori and Trudchen.

4

Berger disliked being defined as a comic novelist, a label that enables reviewers to dismiss a work for not being funny enough. All of Berger’s novels have their laugh-out-loud moments, but his ironic comedy is about far more than hilarity; rather it dramatizes unsettling truths about the human condition. “What fools these mortals be,” is comedy’s central message. Berger thought the term “savage farce” fit Crazy in Berlin and did not object to being called “a farceur.” While ironic comedy is Berger’s dominant mode, he wears many masks. Crazy in Berlin displays a Rabelaisian relish for life’s absurdities, employs multiple genres, and weaves an intricate web of diverse tones and themes. The mostly comic early part of the novel focuses on Reinhart’s efforts to come to terms with his ethnic heritage and his bungling into sexual misadventures that force him to confront his own duplicity.

The novel opens on a raucous note that suggests more serious themes. To celebrate his twenty-first birthday, Reinhart and his “dumb but lovable buddy” Marsala were drunkenly “taking a leak” on a statue of “Frederick der Grosse,” which was, Reinhart admits, “a gross thing to do.”

The compound, complex sentences describing these activities, featuring American slang, wordplay, digressions, and reflections, is typical of Berger’s highly rhetorical style, which has to be read slowly. The novel begins “in the twilight” and nothing in this murky world is clear at first glance. This is Reinhart’s initial venture into war-ravaged Berlin, where bomb craters in the streets require switching trolleys, but Marsala has “been out screwing and playing the black market for a week, with already a dose of crabs and a wad of Occupation marks to
show for it” (5). Marsala is the ugly, or rather vulgar, American, but has “a unique honesty and a kind of honor” (10), that Reinhart values. When a fight over a girl breaks out between Marsala and a 2\textsuperscript{nd} Armored Division combat veteran, Reinhart, who is 6’2” and over 200 pounds, steps in and delivers what appears to be a lethal blow. As when Don Quijote rides to the rescue, however, good intentions yield ironic results. Marsala provoked the fight because he knew it would be two against one and the German woman was not with the badly beaten soldier in the first place. “Lori,” an important character in the novel, handles the confused situation with poise and gains Reinhart’s promise to get her a job. Although his “German was at best uncertain” (8), he is able to communicate, telling Lori that he is just “an Unteroffizier, a corporal, a nobody, a silly fellow” (12), but she sees that he is a genuine German-American brought up on “a regimen of G. virtue (bill-paying, bedding and rising early, melancholia)...‘to be...a big G. like his grandfather’” (15). Reinhart looks back on the day as having “a touch of the exotic. He had drawn blood and spilled some of his own” (18), while Berger uses this essentially comic scene to foreshadow a tragic event near the novel’s close.

Chapter 3 provides a vivid account of Carlo Reinhart’s German-American upbringing. Berger uses a third-person limited perspective that is situated on the horizon of Reinhart’s sensibility, thus expressing his thoughts and feelings more eloquently and ironically than he could. As a boy, Carlo fantasizes about combat in World War I, winning dogfights against the Kaiser’s elite pilots or destroying “the pigface Hun, bayonet of Belgian babies, violator of maidens” (32). A more positive image of Germany comes from his paternal grandfather, “a double for Hindenberg,” who “cut meat on weekdays and on Sundays read the Volks-Zeitung and decanted in the cellar a thin, tasteless homebrew of which he was inordinately proud.”
Reinhart recalls fondly his “enormous, kindly, mustached face that smelled of beer and pipe” (32), but rejects the “virtues” of his conventional parents: “heavy, flavorless food, limited ambitions, disapproval of the maverick, funeral-going, trust in people with broad faces.... ‘German’ as a lifelong malady that was without hope but never serious; as the thin edge above want and far below plenty; as crepe-hanging; as self-pity—yet from these compounding a strange morality that regarded itself as superior to all other variants.” In contrast, Reinhart longs for “‘German’ as the lofty vision, the old and exquisite manners of prince and peasant, battlements and armor, clear water splashing down from high, blue rocks, wine named for the milk of the Virgin, maleness, the noble marriage of feeling and thought” (42).

By the time America enters the war, Carlo is a mediocre college student who stays up half the night reading books of his own choosing. His best grade is a B in zoology lab, because the girl with whom he had “a moody, fitful romance...made his dissection drawings” (38). Ironically, when Reinhart enlists this unearned mark gets him assigned to the medical corps and not a combat unit. While in the Army, he feels obligated “to find reasons why the Germans, though mistaken, though bullies, though bad, if you will, were yet not bad, were not to be allowed that case which the greatest writers assure us even Satan has” (44). His college friends all agree that “the mob” was bad but “the people” were good, and that the only admirable persons were victims whose problems could be solved by social programs. Resisting their smug liberal assumptions, Reinhart makes his own assessment of “the terrible landscape of actuality” (47). He decides that the Nazis were not an aberration, rather German history tracing back to Tacitus displays “tyranny, militarism, suicide, irresponsibility, and madness” (48). When American troops discover the death camps, with their “vast trenches of slack human skins...and
oven-grates of gray human ash, [and] took in their nostrils that bouquet of burned man,” which is instantly recognizable and impossible to forget, Reinhart feels that “the outrage had been done to him...who had trusted in his origins” (48).

A callow youth from a provincial Ohio town, Reinhart has a contrary streak and a serious side. In contrast to most GIs, he likes the Army, “where the petty decisions were provided and the major ones ignored” (48). In Berlin, he is still very much an innocent abroad, mainly concerned with “booze and snatch and other pursuits generally pointless and amoral” (48), yet he asks probing questions about his German-American heritage and the nature of Nazi evil.

At first, Reinhart is filled with conventional GI notions of “the Nazi mythos: old Hitler screaming crazy garbage...swastikaed bruisers maltreating gentle little Jews...and acres of the famous blond pussy...subservient to the man in uniform” (50). His assignment in “Special Services” is to prepare a tour of the principal Nazi ruins. At this point Lori (Lenore Bach) shows up with her “cousin” Trudchen (Gertrud Tischmacher), a sexy teenager. Reinhart is touched by Lori’s air of “melancholy poetry” (62) and with “mixed motives” (61) he arranges for Trudchen to be an interpreter in his office while Lori, who speaks no English, will work as a cleaning woman in the nurses’ quarters. Reinhart is aware that the two women have selected him for help because “he looked first like a fool and second like a German” (62). Lori even offers advice about how he might find his relatives.

Reinhart worries that “if Nazism was a German disease of the bone, his own marrow, even at two generations remove, could hardly be spotless” (66). While prowling through deserted mansions looted by the Russians, he feels an irresistible impulse to smash “everything that came to hand” and speculates that his “passion to destroy simply because it could be got
away with” was typical of Nazism. The puzzle was how the Nazis, who “had first been clowns,”
suddenly became “devils” (67). Reinhart believes in “common decency,” but otherwise feels
“at odds with the world, a kind of Nazi without swastika...a crazy feeling” (67). Indeed, he begins to act like a Nazi in terms of his relationship with Trudchen, herself a creature of the Reich. After she is seen with Chaplain Peggott, she later complains to Reinhart that “your priest...tried to have his vay viss me.... He touched me—here” (127), placing Carlo’s hand on her breast. In the erotic fiasco that soon follows, Reinhart alternates between too much or too little imagination to cope with her wiles. The question is, “What game is she playing” (137).

Although his lust for Trudchen has a sordid side, their affair is also rich in ironic comedy. As Reinhart struggles to separate truth from falsehood, she proves to be “the most incredible liar he had ever met” (184). To get what she wants she lies about her age, stealing a pen, where she lives, and the war. Her true story remains obscure, but her amorality and anti-Semitism imply an unsavory past: she may have belonged to Hitler’s “Jungmädel” (437). Yet her voice and actions are presented with such gusto that she is one of the novel’s most human characters. Experienced beyond her years, she retains (or feigns) a certain charm. Trudchen is a survivor whose contradictions attract Reinhart, despite being warned by his nemesis Lieut. Nathan Schild that she is “a tart” (125) who will get him in trouble. She, in turn, suspects Schild’s interest in old Nazi files, while it never occurs to Reinhart and his superior Lieut. Pound that Schild might be a traitor. Conversely, she is all too familiar with the double agent and black marketer Schatzi and convinces Carlo to hire him to find his relatives.

When she arrives at work in “a peek-a-boo white blouse,” face painted, hair done up, and in high heels, the result is “also a lie: that she was a mature girl” (182). Seeking pity to
deflect criticism, she tells tales of suffering through American bombings and displays a proclamation from the anti-Nazi resistance, which perversely goads Carlo into having sex with her while she calls him “Mein Tiger!” (192). Carlo regrets acting like a storm trooper, albeit with Truchen’s complicity, but he still visits her room, where she cries out, “You don’t hurt me enough!” (237). Reinhart self-servingly concludes that she “was too depraved to defile” (251).

Simultaneously, Reinhart falls in love with the voluptuous Nurse Lieutenant Veronica Leary, aka Very: “although she was very beautiful, Very was reclaimed by her size; it was a near deformity, being almost divine, and made her human” (85). After they dance and kiss, Reinhart decides that she is essentially “a nice girl, the sort whose intimacies were flagrant because her intentions were innocent” (22). He courts her in a traditional way, going on picnics and engaging in lively conversations. Thus he screws Trudchen while fantasizing about Very, who one day announces, “I’m pregnant,” leaving him to ponder with Shakespearean affectation, “Who hath usurped my office twixt the sheets?” (267). Reinhart’s escapades are a variation on “the feminization of fraternization” in postwar Berlin. Each GI in his apartment building has “a local mistress” (253), but Carlo’s story has a Jekyll and Hyde dimension: Very is becoming bored because he is too “normal,” while his “other self...lodged with Trudchen, the mad one,” thus freeing “the front man, to be so smooth and bland. Back there, Himmler did his dreadful work; up here was elegant Ribbentrop, kissing hands” (254). Reinhart is discovering his own divided nature but he still must descend into the labyrinth that was Nazi Germany.

Reinhart’ most compelling relationship is with Lori, whose worldly sensibility is reminiscent of the anonymous author of A Woman in Berlin. Unlike Trudchen or Very, she is a
mature woman haunted by the war and its aftermath. Her permanent sadness breaks his heart. Lori is married to a “very strange” man who played “an odd role” (138) during the war.

Reinhart’s meeting with him demonstrates how paradoxical and elusive truth can be. Bach is “a good seven feet tall and bulky as the great Kodiak bear” (140); his enormous weight anchors him to the sofa in their cramped cellar quarters, yet he has a wide-ranging mind that is always theorizing about the nature of things. He is an autodidact in love with language and the way words do and do not reveal the real world, noting that Reinhart’s name means “pure of heart” (140) before meditating on the mind/body problem and how Japanese and Chinese poetry reveal national character. Reinhart is intrigued, but Lori is embarrassed, remarking that her husband is drunk and that “life is merely several long stories laid end to end” (145).

The heart of this chapter is Bach story about how he made a “great reversal (from philo-to anti-Semitism)” (153) and became a Nazi. A Protestant from Bavaria, at the university Bach was “infatuated with Jews, and with their culture” (148), rejecting the Nazis as “an unholy alliance of gangsters and buffoons” (149). Then one day he saw a Jewish friend “snickering” at him and felt betrayed. In sorrow and rage he joined the storm troopers during Kristallnacht, smashing “the Jewish shops in the Kurfürstendamm” (157). Throughout this convoluted tale, Bach theorizes about Jewish identity and intentions: “The Jew does not want, and does not ask for simple understanding. He craves only total victory, and rewards anything less with corrosive hatred” (150). What makes him so sinister is the “ability to pursue his end by contradictory means…. He can assume any position at will, for he believes in none” (150). The ultimate aim is to stop time: “When is replaces to be, he will have won” (151). The Holocaust was a mistake, Bach argues, because by weeding out the “weaklings” (155) the Nazis increased Jewish moral
strength. Not surprisingly, “Bach’s rhetoric...made poor Reinhart’s head reel, from amusement through indignation to logical vertigo” (156). At the end of this bizarre monologue, Lori laughingly assures Reinhart that what he has heard was all a lie—a man of Bach’s size, for example, could not possibly be in the SS. In truth, Lori is half-Jewish and during the war Bach sold his art collection to save her life.

“Why would he tell such a story?” (158) Reinhart asks and so does the reader. What is Berger’s intention? Although Bach’s fable is a total distortion of his own admirable life, it captures the twisted logic of Hitler and his fanatic followers. One of the enduring puzzles of the Holocaust is how such a cultivated people could have condoned ultimate evil. Bach’s cultural sophistication (his name conjures up great German composers) lends his story credibility, but his references to millions of human beings as “the Jew” serve as a warning. Indeed, this is the way Hitler thought. Once he said that the most notorious anti-Semite in his entourage “idealized the Jew. The Jew is baser, fiercer, more diabolical than [Julius] Streicher depicted him.” He accused the Jews of seeking world domination: “There can be no compromise—there are only two possibilities: either victory of the Aryan or annihilation of the Aryan and the victory of the Jew.” Lucy Dawidowicz has argued that the deliberate omission of the paired antitheses “annihilation of the Jews” in this 1922 speech was a “signal to the congnoscenti” of Hitler’s lethal intentions. He projected his own evil designs on the enemy he plotted to destroy. A telling detail is that Bach cites Jews “snickering” at him as the catalyst of his transformation. Hitler spoke of the Jews laughing “at my prophecies” and promised that soon “their laughter will everywhere subside.” His repeated use of this metaphor to hint at the Holocaust suggests, scholars have argued, that Hitler was an artist of evil, a highly conscious and calculating Iago,
“whose ‘motiveless malignancy’ was all cynically manipulative sleight of hand, not even faintly ‘redeemed’ by a sincerity, however pathological.” After a lifetime of study, biographer Alan Bullock concluded that Hitler was an “actor who comes to believe sincerely in his own act.” Thus Bach’s ironic pack of lies, typical of the closed rhetorical system true believers crave, captures multilayered truths about Hitler and the Nazis.

Lori realizes that Bach’s story has baffled and disturbed Reinhart. “I am ashamed of my German descent,” he asserts, but Lori promptly replies: “Don’t talk of things you cannot understand” (159). She explains that in a world of the unspeakable “the meaningful things are never said,” hence Bach “is infected with the Berliner’s disease—irony and gallows humor” (160), which constitutes a key to the novel. Galgenhumor, an offshoot of Middle-European Jewish humor, implies a resort to wit in the face of catastrophe and the use of “irony, invectives, and sarcasm” to raise the spirits of people in an impossible situation. Reinhart will never comprehend the complexity of Hitler’s evil and of German complicity in the Holocaust, but he does learn that dealing with the absurd incongruities of life, even the horrors of existence, requires “irony, that means to confront the ideal with the actual and not go mad, that whip which produced the pain that hurts-so-good, so the measure to which it hurt was also funny” (247-48). At the end of this memorable chapter, Lori brings Reinhart back from ultimate questions to the simple fact that “one is always just a person.” Even Hitler, who loved jelly omelets, had “moments when his sole concern was to retain a bit of slippery jam on a fork” (161). Reinhart, head still spinning, apologizes to Lori for being a fool, but she reassures him, with a final tender irony, that he is “a good fool, a kind fool” (161).

Reinhart’s tour of “the now deranged nerve center of Hitler Germany” (238) culminates
at Hitler’s bunker, guarded by a hostile Russian. After Reinhart accidentally falls into a nearby trench where the bodies of Hitler and Eva Braun probably were burned, a “stout captain” with a “manifestly German-American face” (244) asks how both Communists and Nazis could kill so many people: “what makes fellows like that—because that’s what they are, aren’t they, just fellows, people like anybody else in the beginning”? (245). The captain, a Jewish physician named Bernstein, vows that Hitler “must never happen again” (246). This declaration causes Reinhart to realize that Hitler’s first victims were German Jews, who “had been too trusting, too naïve, too German and not Jewish enough” to protect themselves: “Such innocence was almost wicked” (247) but also morally impressive—they kept faith in their fellow man. Once again, Reinhart is confronted by radical irony, “the queer, inside-out logic” of Bach. Perhaps “Jews really were the chosen, the superior people” (247), a thought that swamps Reinhart with contradictory feelings of respect for and hatred of Bernstein.

A month later Reinhart returns to the cellar, where his education in the paradoxical nature of human behavior continues. Assuming that Schild is Very’s lover, Reinhart brings him to see Lori’s brother, a blind doctor named Otto Knebel, to arrange an abortion. Schild, in turn, thinks Reinhart is the father. This bit of slapstick leads to serious misunderstandings later. The doctor takes up where Bach left off in spinning fantastic tales. Reinhart wants to make a speech in defense of our “common humanity” but his words, although sincere, ring false. What he thinks but can’t articulate, however, is profound: “all we have in this great ruined Berlin of existence, this damp cellar of life, this constant damage in need of repair, is single, lonely, absurd-and-serious selves; and the only villainy is to let them pass beyond earshot” (319-20).

Ironically, the blind doctor’s motive for coming “was simply to ‘see’ an American” (327),
while Reinhart is awed that he has survived both Nazi and Soviet persecution. To show the doctor his sophistication, Carlo mocks how Nazis were portrayed in film:

“...American movies are made for an audience whose average mental age is twelve years old. You should have seen the pictures they made on Nazism. Such trash is almost criminal.”

“The Nazis were presented as good men?”

“Oh no, but either they were monsters who did not resemble human beings or they were ridiculous buffoons.” He was making out all right with his primitive, do-it-yourself German, for the doctor seemed to understand.

“Also, this was an error: too realistic. I agree with you, this theme should be dealt with as fantasy.” (331)

This comic anecdote implies how baffling human nature can be—the Nazis at their worst out-caricatured their caricature. Reinhart’s desire to defend basic moral precepts—“we must love one another or die” (333)—is undercut by the doctor’s response: “Love one another or die? But we die anyway, ja?” (337). Once again, Reinhart receives a lesson in irony: “There is no wit like that of Berlin” (332), Bach tells him. Nevertheless, Reinhart insists that “Nazism...is not just a German but a human thing.... I have been guilty of Nazism when I used force or threatened to on someone weaker than I or outnumbered, or when I had bad thoughts about Jews and other defenseless people” (342). Reinhart’s naïve Humanism can go only so far. When it comes to the Holocaust and the Soviet Gulag he is out of his depth—indecent behavior is not the same as sheer evil.52

The doctor tells a long story that dramatizes complex historical realities undreamt of in Carlo’s philosophy. He was a half-Jewish German Communist who fled to the Soviet Union
when Hitler came to power. When the Great Purge began in 1936, Jewish Communists were doomed, since “Trotsky, born Lev Bronstein” (347), was seen as the chief plotter against Stalin. Tortured to name accomplices, the doctor betrays “an old Russian Jew” Kupstein, mistakenly assuming that he is a Soviet spy. Sentenced to the Gulag, the doctor is then turned over to the Gestapo, who list him “as Communist first, Jew second,” and hold him for questioning, while his wife, children, father, and brothers all die at Buchenwald. Nazi torture costs him his eyes, but spares his life. These horrific experiences give the doctor authority to compare concentration camps. “The Nazis preferred the man who by existence was a criminal, a Jew” (338). These they killed indiscriminately, regardless of whether they might be “useful” or not. While “the aim of the Soviet camps is to change people…. Their favorite prisoner is the man capable of learning the error of his ways” (338). One was exclusive, the other inclusive, but the doctor grimly concludes: “The Nazi camps were worse” (351). After such knowledge, what forgiveness.

Reinhart learns to understand Hitler and the Holocaust in human, all too human terms. Hitler was a person who ate jelly omelets; the storm troopers were fellow human beings; the Germans did what other people are capable of doing. Yet a satisfactory interpretation of events of such magnitude is beyond Reinhart’s or even Berger’s powers. As Ron Rosenbaum points out in Explaining Hitler, there is “a great schism” among important scholars of the Holocaust: “those who speak of Hitler as ‘one of us,’ of a ‘Hitler within’ all of us, a potential for Hitlerian evil in all human nature, in our nature—and those who maintain one of several varieties of Hitlerian exceptionalism,” such as Yeduda Bauer, for whom Hitler represents “near-ultimate evil.” The problem of defining Hitler as “just a very, very bad man...[who] differs only in degree...[from] ourselves, diminishes the radical evil Hitler represents.” On the other hand, if
Hitler is too “exceptional,” then who can be blamed for falling under his spell? Thus excusing the many Germans and other Europeans who were “willing” participants in the Holocaust.

Berger appears to side with those who argue that a necessary “r rawness inheres in finding Hitler not inhuman or demonic but in finding him somehow human. It’s a rawness that goes beyond Prospero’s saying of the fiendish Caliban, ‘this thing of darkness I acknowledge mine.’” The “crazy” stories Reinhart hears in Berlin dramatize, as Melville said great literature should, a sense of humanity’s innate depravity, while hinting at rare acts of nobility.

Unlike the other volumes in the tetralogy, Reinhart’s is not the only point of view. More than a third of Crazy in Berlin focuses on the conspiratorial activities of an American traitor Schild, a German con man Schatzi, and a Soviet defector Lichenko. Since all three men are double-agents of a sort, not one is who he appears to be, and each misinterprets the intentions of the others, the chapters that focus on them raise troubling questions about whether human beings have a core identity. Without Reinhart to provide comedy and control, Berger’s style is less effective in places, especially in the case of Nathan Schild, who lacks a distinctive voice and sensibility. When I mentioned these objections in 1970, Berger responded: “There are New York ex-Communist Jews to whom the character of Nathan Schild is more eloquent than any other I have created.” A year later Berger noted that his Jewish friends had falsely assumed that he “had known a human being who had fit the description [of Schild]. Now that I think of it, this may be the most telling confirmation of your belief that he fails as a character!” These problems undercut but do not negate the book’s considerable merits, while the deliberately murky subplot does require some explication.
Unaware that he is a spy, Reinhart sympathizes with Schild because he is a German-American Jew. When Stalin established the Popular Front in 1935, many Americans, a large number of them Jewish, became enthusiastic participants, since the Soviets seemed to have taken the lead in combating the Nazis. What few could imagine, however, was that Stalin secretly admired Hitler, especially after his execution of Ernst Röhm and other leading storm troopers. Stalin used the Popular Front to divert world attention from his own Great Purge, which would claim millions of lives. Schild believes that the Moscow show trials are valid and that Communism is the hope of the world. He even becomes a Communist after the Stalin-Hitler Pact of 1939. His co-conspirator in Berlin is the conniving Schatzi, who Schild admires as “a good German” (75) because he survived the death camps; actually he was a criminal who made Jewish prisoners dig their own graves. In German, Schatzi’s name ironically means “sweetheart,” while in English it suggests excrement, befitting for someone who returned from the anus mundi of Auschwitz. Dismissing Reinhart as “a great lout” and “a clown” (78), he and Schild plot to steal Nazi files under the control of Capt. Roderick St. George, who gives no thought to espionage, leaving Schatzi to wonder if there is “something sinister” (25) about Americans being too naïve to realize that the Soviets are playing “the deep game” (77).

The plot thickens when a deserter from the Red Army, “Leutnant Lichenko” (98), arrives. Schild admires Lichenko for fighting the fascists, decides he is playing a “larger game” (114), and keeps his presence a secret from Schatzi. Actually he is a Ukrainian disgusted with the Soviet system. Puzzled why Schild would “give allegiance to a pack of murderers,” Lichenko vows to defect and “also save Nathan” (116). For the most part, Berger handles this comedy of devious cross-purposes well. Schild thinks that “Lichenko was the new man who had sprung, unarmed,
from the forehead of an idea” (202), but it is Schild who clings to an ideology: “For a cause, a real cause, a man first forsakes all others to become one; and then, if he has a true vocation, denies the one to become many” (202). Schild’s boyhood friend Milton Grossman acts on these assumptions, joins the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and dies in Spain. The official report blames tetanus; actually he was executed by his own Party for “Trotskyist wrecking” (208). Grossman hints at his bitter fate in his last letter—“When at last the Messiah comes, he will be an anti-Semite” (211)—but the humorless Schild is nobody to understand irony. In contrast to Reinhart’s agonizing efforts to seek the truth of human nature in spite of the shifting, elusive, and contradictory nature of the world, Schild is a true believer in communism.

Lichenko is a walking refutation of the Soviet system. He sees Schild as a generous man who has been duped into accepting the ideology of “a gang of evil thugs” (217-18). As Schild talks about the hardships of his own immigrant parents in New York, Lichenko can only think how much better off they were than whose who perished in “the Kremlin-made famine of 1933” (225). Unfortunately, Schild can only parrot the Party Line and ignore the ugly realities. Noting “a film of dust and at least one fingerprint, distinct in oil” on Schild’s glasses, Lichenko shouts at him: “Why don’t you clean your glasses?... You can’t see out of your own head!” (230). When Lichenko admits he wants to defect and, to atone for cheating at cards, offers him cash, Schild misinterprets his gift “to a person of your type” (234) as a slur against Jews. The bitter irony here is that Schild then betrays the only man who has any sympathy for him, thus condemning Lichenko to the Gulag and almost certain death.

Reinhart’s conflicted feelings toward Jews center on Nathan Schild. By mistakenly thinking that he is Very’s lover, Reinhart sets in motion events with fatal consequences. When
Schatzi learns of Carlo’s suspicions, he informs his Soviet superiors that Schild plans to betray them. Schatzi is also manipulating Reinhart in the hope of obtaining American relations to cover his escape to the United States. In this duplicitious subplot, Schatzi’s character is captured in convincing detail. Berger keeps him in voice by changing word order and vocabulary to suggest a German speaking English. In Chapter 17 Schatzi recalls the early years of the Nazi movement. Konrad Heiden, whose work Berger relies on, notes that Hitler in 1919 “was by all his own accounts and those of others... a human nothing.” To Schatzi he is merely “the foul little Austrian upstart” (296). After fighting in the streets of Munich, Schatzi comes “to the attention of Captain Ernest Röhm...for more purposes than one, as it turned out” (285). Röhm, whose army clashed in Bavaria with the Reds and government troops, was a notorious homosexual with an inner circle deeply devoted to him. When Schatzi reports that “Fritz [Schild] is going to marry an American nurse,” his Soviet control officer Sergeyev replies with a question: “you were Ernst Röhm’s very favorite fairy-boy of all, nicht wahr?” (294).

Schatzi almost died in the “Night of the Long Knives” (30 June 1934) in which Röhm and many of his henchmen were shot. Rudolph Hess had warned that “Röhm’s male harem within the S.A. were gradually becoming unbearable,” and Hitler, fearing plots against him, decided “to put an end to an intolerable situation.” Schatzi and 150 S.A. officers were imprisoned “in the Cadet School coal cellar in Lichterfelde” (297) and systematically executed. Heiden argues that the slaughter of Röhm and his followers set the pattern for Hitler’s grand design “to enslave the continent.” Schatzi miraculously survives the massacre but then is apprehended by the Gestapo two years later. During a death march from Auschwitz to Mauthausen at the war’s end, he “was permitted to escape, only to be captured by Polish vigilantes, who the
Soviets in turn shot, “but saved Schatzi” (294). Now “officially an unperson” (294), “a man who could be used” (295), the Soviets send him to Berlin to spy for Sergeyev, the control agent to whom he reports about Schild. At the same time Schatzi thrives in the black market, selling fraudulent china and whatever else he can get his hands on. A chameleon, a shape shifter and costume changer who assumes any name, identity, value, or cause that suits his selfish purposes, Schatzi epitomizes troubling aspects of the human condition. He has seen the worst of both the Nazi and Soviet systems and now disbelieves “in anything but the unlikely” (291).

7

All these complex plot strands that play variations on Berger’s central themes come together as the novel nears its conclusion. In Chapter 20, as they walk away from the cellar where the blind doctor has told them about Schatzi’s activities at Auschwitz, Reinhart and Schild have a conversation where they almost achieve mutual understanding. Reinhart expresses love for the ruins of Berlin: “All the crap has been blasted away, leaving something honest, and I think what the doctor meant to say was that honesty really does win out in the end” (358). Reinhart believes that “the doctor himself is a fake” (358) but “honest in the fundamental human things” (366). He illustrates his thinking by describing Albrecht Dürer’s great 16th century etching “Ritter, Tod, und Teufel” of a dauntless knight on “a crummy, melancholy old horse” riding through the Devil’s lair: “The scene takes place in a gully full of junk, lizards, skulls, tree-roots, etc.; it looks something like Berlin today” with a “great castle” (359) in the distance. “The Knight rides through the gully as if he doesn’t see them…. [He has a] wonderful tough face, sure of itself, looking not at the airy castle or horseshit Death or the mangy Devil, because they’ll all three get him soon enough, but he doesn’t care. He is
complete in himself—isn’t that what integrity means?—and he is proud of it, because he is smiling a little” (360-61). For Reinhart, the Knight has risen above the horrors of modern history: “He is a man and needs no helpless victim to give him respect” (361). When Schild suggests the stoic Knight would be less heroic if we saw the serfs assisting him with his heavy armor, Reinhart replies that art is a lie whose truths are available to serf and knight alike: “a picture belongs to anybody who looks at it” (362).

In an effort to express his conflicted feelings about Jews, Reinhart says that they “are sometimes know-it-alls and their manners could stand improvement, but that doesn’t have anything to do with decency and is anyway proof of their freedom” (364). Schild resents these generalizations, but Reinhart pushes on: “I’m sick of being made to feel a swine because I’m of German descent.... Do you know what it is to be in debt to everybody? Not you, you are always right” (365). From the start Reinhart has been brooding that the Holocaust gives the Jewish people a permanent moral one-up on others, especially German-Americans. In response, Schild simply states, “I am a murderer” (365). Unaware that Schild has betrayed Lichenko, Reinhart assumes he is referring to the “kill or be killed” nature of combat. Schild has confessed his crime to “a pure-hearted fool” (366) in the hope of absolution; instead Reinhart muses about war and human responsibility: “you can’t blame a man for not being a hero” (366). By the time they part, the situation has reversed, and it is Schild who offers Reinhart forgiveness. These exchanges are poignant because each is trying in spite of their distrust to be honest with the other, as they struggle toward a tentative friendship.

After informing on him to the Soviets, the always contrary Schatzi decides to warn Schild: “they know everything—you don’t deal now with stupid Nazis” (369). Schild in turn tells
Schatzi to report to Sergeyev that “Fritz is finished” (372) being a Soviet spy, thus making Schatzi’s false information true. The idealism that Schild displays both to join and now to renounce the Party baffles Schatzi: “You Amis are the strangest of the strange.... You really believe that you are the master race.... The Germans, you know, never did, and least of all when this crazy sissy Adolf, and this cripple Goebbels, and that fat Zeppelin with the large mouth Goering, told them they were. A German knows he is not anysing” (374). Germans, Schatzi points out, feel inferior to the English, the French, their own philosophers, and especially “the Jews, always so clever and successful.... I work for the Communists because they force me.... But can you get me to America...?” (374). Berger is at his best in scenes where the received wisdom is overturned and the contrary nature of people is stressed. Reinhart’s words and actions often capture these “crazy” ironic reversals. Schild has left the Party, but he still favors revolution. When Reinhart states, “I accept life. Some things in it are by nature hateful,” Schild replies, “You are the most extreme reactionary I have ever met” (378).

The two always talk at cross-purposes, never quite understanding each other. That evening Reinhart observes Schild meet two men, assumes he is playing the black market, and thinks “how like a Jew” (380). When they drag Schild to their car, however, his anti-Semitic assumptions are reversed: “some European kind of thugs, ranged against a little Jew” (380), and he feels that “no choice was left for a coward but to run towards them” (381). Schild knows that these are Sergeyev’s men, but doesn’t realize the danger he is in, so he orders Carlo to cease his “naïve bungling” (381). Reinhart fears that once again he has “misjudged appearances” (381), but this time he is right to come to Schild’s defense. In the ensuring fight, Reinhart uses his “murderous” strength to break the back of a huge German “Monster,” only to
see, before passing out, Schild stabbed to death by the other man. Reinhart has tried to play the knight rescuing someone in distress, but his heroic efforts fail. In a world ruled by injustice and absurdity, going crazy becomes a form of sanity.

In punishment for “his error with the agent Fritz” (385), Sergeyev is taken to prison and questioned by Major Chepurnik: “Your only hope is to convince me you were misled in your criminal ventures” (388). As with the American films about Nazis that Reinhart mocked, this is another case where the crudest caricature is all too accurate. Chepurnik thinks “Reingart” was a bodyguard for the double agent Schild and that Schatzi is “a loyal Communist of impeccable character” (392). Given such lunatic notions, after twenty confessions Sergeyev still has not satisfied his interrogator. As W. G. Krivitsky said of Stalin’s purges: “The reasons for a man’s arrest had no relation to the charges against him.... When I say that the Soviet government became a gigantic madhouse, I mean it literally.” Berger’s concise prose and convincing detail make this sequence very effective, foreshadowing more craziness to come.

Reinhart wakes up as a patient in Superficial Wounds and Contusions, but what ails him is much more than being kicked in the head. “You been here three weeks,” Marsala tells him. “But you keep acting crazy, they send you to Psycho” (403). Indeed, Carlo has a deranged sense of time, feels as if “he shared a skin with another man” (413), and cannot separate fantasy from reality. He tells Captain Millet, one of “the Psycho people” (405), that he doesn’t regret killing the big German; instead, he feels guilty for Schild’s death, which has become conflated in his mind with the Holocaust: “What I am involved in is the murder of a whole continent of Jews by my people” (414). Although never sure that Schild was a spy, Reinhart has suspicions; thus he dissembles about what happened, suggesting that it was a black market deal gone wrong.
Nurse Very tells Reinhart that her pregnancy was “a false alarm” (395), adding one more crazy irony. After they finally have sex—in an exuberantly described scene—Carlo begins to regain his sanity. Reinhart is not in love with Very, however, but with Lori, who explains that his hopes are not practical. She is twice his age, loves Bach, and has lived through twelve years of Hitler and war: “People from different countries really don’t understand each other” (418).

Reinhart has immersed himself so deeply in the ambiguity of human experience that he no longer believes that there are any sure answers to life’s most perplexing questions. In his last session with Millet, he theorizes that “man is a savage only partially tamed” and that if the surface of life “is a lie, so are the depths” and thus, paradoxically, “the façade, too, has a reality and truth” (423). He is torn between asserting that he is only “concerned about myself” and that “someone must care” (424). Systematic thinking is not Reinhart’s forte; yet in spite of his flaws he is a sympathetic character, because he does care, wishes to have a pure heart, and tries to make sense of his as well as other people’s existence. He comes to understand that the world, by its very nature, is out of joint, and no one, certainly not Carlo Reinhart, can set it right.

Since he is still a little “crazy,” at the novel’s end he is on his way to a clinic outside Paris. Marsala gives his version of the situation: “You make a whore out of a young kid, you knock off a guy with your bare hands, then you play nuts and get home before everybody else. What college you come from, I think it was reform school” (428). Reinhart reflects on “the great, ruined, dear city” of Berlin (432), where “he had learned to doubt all appearances, which must also include a false one: that is, its falsity might consist in its being real. The world was strange—and interesting. And difficult” (434). Final proof: on the plane Reinhart recognizes Schatzi in disguise. Schatzi tells him the truth, “this swine Schild sold his country” (436), but
lies about himself: “I have reformed” (437). Reinhart has learned from his experiences, but he is doomed to remain more fool than knight. Not believing that Schild was a traitor or that Schatzi had changed, Reinhart informs on him and foils his escape. The cycle of bafflement and betrayal goes on.

We come away from Crazy in Berlin with a heightened sense that this world is composed of absurd-and-serious selves; that mankind is a tragi-comic blend of the vile and the beautiful. And thanks to Berger’s unsettling artistry, we can laugh about it, think about it. Crazy in Berlin is a flawed first novel—if Homer occasionally nods our best contemporary novelists can nap—yet it deserves a respectful reading because it dramatizes enduring conundrums of human nature while suggesting how they play out in relation to the Holocaust and the Cold War. Many prominent American novelists have ignored these disastrous events that shaped the twentieth century, and none of our espionage writers of the period measured up to John le Carré. At the heart of Berger’s vision is an awareness that we botch what we touch; we are by nature contrary and live at cross-purposes with each other. These ironic insights shed light on the horrors inflicted by totalitarian systems as they force people to fit their preconceptions. Isaiah Berlin, who has written eloquently about these issues, admired something Immanuel Kant said, “in a moment of illumination,” that encapsulates Berger’s vision: “Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.”63 We are, in sum, human, all too human.
8 Berger, “Grandfather’s Homeland,” 159-60.
15 Thomas Berger, review of Leon Poliakov, Harvest of Hate, The Socialist Call (July-August 1955), 22.
18 David W. Madden, “An Interview with Thomas Berger,” in Madden, Critical Essays, 15
22 Frederick Nietzsche, citations from The Birth of Tragedy, 130, 52, 141, 33, 94; Beyond Good and Evil, 227, note, 4, p. 201; On the Genealogy of Morals, 474, 532, Basic Writings of Nietzsche, Walter Kaufman, ed. and trans. (New York: The Modern Library, 1992). One of Nietzsche’s books is entitled Human, All-Too-Human (1878).
23 Thomas Berger to William Heath, 7 Nov. 1967.
26 Ibid.
32 On 23 April 1945, Gen. Hickey pleaded to advance his forces: “Why can’t we go to Berlin, for God’s sake! It’s wide open…. We can beat the goddamn Russians by three days!” Franklin M. Davis, Jr., *Come as a Conqueror: The United States Army’s Occupation of Germany 1945-1949* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 197.
34 Ibid., 77-78, 115, 147, 20. The author’s harrowing account of Berlin in 1945 caused the book to be virtually banned in Germany; it was reissued in a new translation in 2005 and made into a movie. In a radio talk on “Berlin Dialect,” Walter Benjamin noted: “The real Berlin wit is not targeted at other people, but rather…the joker himself.” Translated by Scott E. Pincokowski.
45 Goedde, *GIs and Germans*, 59.
46 Martha Gelhorn, in Hitchcock, *Bitter Road*, 181.
47 Goedde, *GIs and Germans*, 86, 96.
48 Hughes, “Thomas Berger’s Elan,” 34.
52 For a defense of Reinhart’s Humanism, see Hughes, “Schlemiel as Humanist.”
58 Ibid., 742-48, 755.
59 Ibid., 772-73.
60 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Kaufman, ed. *Basic Writings*, 123.
62 “Like Alfred Hitchcock, I have strolled through one of my scenes: as Reinhart is about to board the airplane that will carry him back to the USA [by way of Paris], in *Crazy in Berlin*, he is bored by a tall thin T/5 with ‘heavy
eyebrows arched in perpetual curiosity’ [426]. I did indeed at that time weight about 160 lbs,” Thomas Berger to Brooks Landon (1 August 1978), Landon, Thomas Berger, 15.