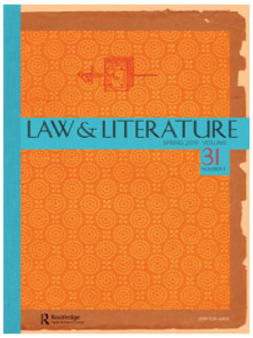

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Michiel Bot

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"Translating" *Mein Kampf*: Arnon Grunberg's Profanations

Michiel Bot

Abstract, In this article, I borrow Giorgio Agamben's conception of profanation to analyze Dutch writer Arnon Grunberg's novel *The Jewish Messiah* (2004), whose grotesque plot includes a translation project of *Mein Kampf* into Yiddish. I read *The Jewish Messiah* as a profanation that seeks to counteract sacralizations of Adolf Hitler's book as the "Bible of Evil" in Western European secular societies such as the Netherlands and Germany, where the distribution and translation of *Mein Kampf* has been legally proscribed. But I also read Grunberg's novel as a profanation that seeks to undermine sacralizations of literature that place literature in a special zone governed by a supposed (Western, secular, liberal) social contract not to take offense. Steering away both from the secularist maxim that what can be offended must be offended and from the mandate to avoid giving offense in the name of liberal tolerance, Grunberg's work, I argue, provokes its readers to reflect on the question by what exactly we should feel offended.

Keywords, Arnon Grunberg, *The Jewish Messiah*, *Mein Kampf*, offense, secularism, liberalism, taboo, Salman Rushdie affair, profanation, translation rights

LITERATURE AND OFFENSE

Four years after the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), novelist Milan Kundera published an essay, on what has come to be known as the Rushdie affair, with the apocalyptic title "Le jour où Panurge ne fera plus rire" (The day when Panurge will no longer make [people] laugh).[1] In this essay, Kundera defined modern literature as "the territory where moral judgment is suspended."[2] This suspension of moral judgment does not make literature immoral, Kundera argued. On the contrary, literature's suspension of judgment is itself a morality: a relativistic and individualistic morality that gives substance to the idea of human rights by portraying a plurality of autonomous characters who cannot be reduced to preexisting truths, conceptions of good and evil, or objective laws. Novels, Kundera claimed, teach readers not to form immediate judgments about everything, to be curious of others, and to understand "truths that are different from their own."[3] In

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Kundera's view, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* epitomized the art of the novel, because "[n]obody is right and nobody is entirely wrong in this work, which is an immense *carnival of relativity*."[4] Thus, Kundera argued: "[R]ushdie has not blasphemed. He has not attacked Islam. He has written a novel."[5] What is saddest about the Rushdie affair, Kundera submitted, is not Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* condemning Rushdie to death, it is "[E]urope's incapacity to defend and explain (explain patiently to itself and to others) the art of the novel that is a European art par excellence, in other words, to explain and defend its own culture."[6]

Central to Kundera's argument is the idea that modern literature is governed by a contract. The essay began with a reference to the opening poem of François Rabelais' *Gargantua*, which promises its "dear readers" (*amis lecteurs*): "[…] No offence here to scandalize/ Nothing corrupting lurks inside/ Little perfection here may hide/ Save laughter: little else you'll find […]."[7] Kundera read this poem as a contract between the novelist and his readers: the writer made it clear that his story was not serious because he did not affirm any truths or describe any facts, and the readers promised, in turn, not to take offense. In other words, Kundera read the poem as a contract to consider literature intrinsically inoffensive. However, Kundera's reading takes Rabelais' poem itself strangely seriously: Kundera assumed that the poem was not part of the rest of the text and that it "seriously" affirmed a truth or described a fact, namely, that the rest of the text was not to be taken seriously. Thus, Kundera's conception of literature in this essay hinged on a rigid separation between truth and fiction and between seriousness and laughter, a separation that needs to be "explained and defended." If literature were to be the "territory where moral judgment is suspended," "Europe," "the society of the novel," Kundera urged, needed to stand up for the contract that separates this space from the world of facts that threatens to encroach on it.

Thus, for Kundera, the freedom of literature is an *exceptional* freedom (*exceptio artis*). The reason that Rushdie has not blasphemed or attacked Islam by publishing *The Satanic Verses* is that novels simply *cannot* blaspheme or attack: to argue otherwise would be to make what Rushdie himself has described as a "category mistake."[8] Novels operate in an exceptional realm of discourse separate from the "normal" realm of discourse; in J. L. Austin's terms, the conventions of the society of the novel do not give novels the "illocutionary force" to blaspheme or to attack anything.[9] Kundera connects modern literature to secularized Christianity:

> [Thomas] Mann's novel [*Joseph and His Brothers*] has encountered unanimous respect; this is proof that profanation was no longer perceived as offense but was henceforth part of morality [*partie des moeurs*]. During the modern era, unbelief ceased being defiant and provocative, while belief lost its former missionary or intolerant certitude. The shock of Stalinism has played the decisive role in this evolution: as it attempted to erase all memories of Christianity, it

> made it brutally clear that we all, believers or unbelievers, blasphemers or devout observers, belong to the same culture that is rooted in the Christian past without which we would only be shadows without substance, reasoning without vocabulary and spiritually homeless.[10]

Unhappy about what Austin might call the infelicitous misfiring of *The Satanic Verses*, Kundera positions himself as a prophet of Europe's secularized Christian culture, urging intellectuals to repent and ward off the impending apocalypse that would destroy the society of the novel, by preaching the gospel of literature as a space where moral judgment is suspended.

In his 1993 essay "Ethnography, Literature, and Politics: Some Readings and Uses of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*," Talal Asad developed a Foucauldian critique of this line of argument.[11] Asad's main target was a number of articles by and interviews with Rushdie himself in which Rushdie expressed views that were very similar to Kundera's. Asad took issue with the idea that literature belongs to an exceptional order of discourse, in which the "normal" rules of morality are suspended. For Asad, there is only one order of discourse in which every speech act takes place within what he calls "networks of power." Therefore, Asad contested the idea that literature was intrinsically innocent and inoffensive, and that those who took offense to *The Satanic Verses* or who found it blasphemous simply did not understand what literature was. According to Asad, "*The Satanic Verses* is without doubt a deliberatively provocative rhetorical performance in an already charged political field; *that* context has inevitably become integral to the text."[12]

Asad's essay was structured as a binary ideology critique: he argued that behind "the bourgeois doctrine that literature is […] the very truth of life" (Asad criticized this doctrine as a secularization of Christianity, which he sees as a European particularism), and behind the idea that literature was an exceptional space where morality is suspended (ideology) lay the reality of imperial power and class domination of a Muslim proletariat in postcolonial Britain, "a small and politically vulnerable community that is already in some difficulty for its attachment to religious traditions."[13] And behind the false pretense of critics that *The Satanic Verses* is a work of satire or develops a serious critique of Islam (ideology) lay the reality of a "vilification of people's cherished beliefs and practices" that echoed "imperial propaganda," failed to demonstrate "scholarly scruples," and relied on "intimidating rhetoric," not "moral argument."[14]

What is appealing about Asad's essay is his critique of Kundera's argument that literature is intrinsically innocent and innocuous. In Kundera's view, at least as he expressed it in his essay on the Rushdie affair, the only thing that novels "do" is explore and imagine the complex psychologies of individuals. It would seem, however, that *The Satanic Verses*, apart from exploring the complex psychologies of individuals, *does* "intervene" in "an already charged political field," as Asad put it,

and that it *does* "attack" beliefs held sacred by many millions of Muslims. In addition, Kundera sees literature as an institution established and protected by the contract of the society of the novel, by the literary pact signed by all members of an already established public; this institution gives novelists the freedom to write whatever they want, without consequences. According to this theory, works of literature do not themselves participate in the creation of the literary public. However, a more obvious reading of the opening rhyme in Rabelais' *Gargantua* cited above is that it is an integral part of the literary work, and that its main speech act is one of *seduction*: it seduces readers to *become* part of its literary public, to become complicit in the publicness of a text that is, in fact, pretty scandalous. Indeed, as Shoshana Felman and others have argued, seduction is central to the "literary speech act."[15]

But while Asad's argument is useful for thinking about the different speech acts that literature performs, he does not recognize the specificity of literature, and the concept of the public plays no role in his thinking. Thus, Asad might uphold a freedom to satirize as "a mode of moral engagement"; for him, "A satire is supposed to deal with prevailing vices, but the vices must be recognized as such by those against whom the satire is directed."[16] Ultimately, Asad's project is to expose the complicity of Western, secular liberal ideas and values, including the freedom of literature, with "networks of power," and power, for Asad, is the opposite of freedom. That is, freedom for Asad means freedom *from power*, and the criterion for legitimacy of any act, including speech acts and including literature, is that it does not exercise power over others against their will (cf. John Stuart Mill's liberty principle).[17] So for Asad, literature is subjected to the same criterion of legitimacy as any other (speech) act, and the freedom of literature ends where it exercises power over others against their will: it needs to refrain from using "intimidating rhetoric" and "persuasive bullying," and, perhaps, even from seduction.[18]

The novels of Dutch writer Arnon Grunberg do not fit Kundera's conception of modern literature. Although Grunberg's novels are funny, they do not observe Kundera's contract to consider literature non-serious and inoffensive. His novels are not "carnivals of relativity" or celebrations of ambiguity that call for the suspension of moral judgment and teach readers to appreciate the individuality of a plurality of characters. Many of Grunberg's protagonists commit crimes that are unambiguously evil – from gouging out the eye of a sex worker to matricide, prolicide, and the nuclear destruction of the world – and Grunberg's usual focalization through these protagonists does not inspire sympathy for their complex motives and individual personalities, but simultaneously invites readers to identify and provokes them to dis-identify with these characters.

Grunberg's novels not only do not follow Kundera's morality of non-offense, but also they actively attack this morality, by portraying characters who follow it *ad absurdum*. For instance, in *The Jewish Messiah* (2008; originally published in Dutch as *De joodse messias* and as *Grote Jiddische Roman*, 2004), which I will

analyze in detail in this article, the German–Swiss parents of teenaged protagonist Xavier take their son to the sauna to talk about a family secret: Xavier's deceased grandfather had been a concentration camp guard during the Nazi era.[19] Xavier's father explains:

> You can't judge customs, rites, and morals from the perspective of our times, from the point of view of what we know now. […] To give you an example: In the Middle Ages they burned witches; people thought that was completely normal. No one minded. People even thought it was a good thing.[20]

He then goes on to describe the grandfather as a kind, sensitive, and hardworking family man who would rather have done something else with his life than "watching over the Jews," and who had so much energy that he would sometimes hit one of them: "Believe me, if fitness had been invented a little earlier, history would have looked very differently."[21] At dinner that night, he concludes:

> If people would talk to each other more, […] there wouldn't be any war. The only thing to do about it is talk to the enemy. Take things out of the taboo sphere [*Dingen bespreekbaar maken*], the way we did today. If that would happen on a large scale, peace would have a chance. If the Jews had talked to the Germans, man-to-man, without immediately raising their voices, peace would have had a chance.[22]

This is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the morality that Kundera defends, which prescribes understanding, not judgment: once you realize the complexity of other people's motivations and circumstances, you no longer take offense to their actions, but instead have civil conversations with them, without raising your voice. In Grunberg's novels, civil conversations are indeed "beyond offense," but the discursive reason of these conversations amounts to rationalization of things that should not be rationalized. As for a morality of avoiding offense, most of Grunberg's characters are practicing it, and this makes them utterly unresponsive to the needs of others at best and turns them into polite monsters at worst.

However, not observing Kundera's contract of non-seriousness poses a problem for contemporary writers. In his introduction to a 2007 anthology of drawings and writings by French surrealist artist Roland Topor, "giving offense and taking offense" (*aanstoot geven en aanstoot nemen*), Grunberg describes a "sacralization" of offense in 20th-century art that has, paradoxically, turned transgression into the norm:

> Especially since Alfred Jarry – Jarry is in many respects a grandfather of Roland Topor – since the moment it was realized that there

> existed such a thing as an avant-garde, since the discovery of the artist-bohemian, art has declared giving offense sacred.
>
> This sacralization of the rock of offense led to the idea that you couldn't do without. The offense was part of it, you could wait for it, you wanted to wait for it. If you took offense, seated safely in the audience, you did what you had to do. So you no longer had to do it. And those who did not understand that were, yes what were they, they may have been all kinds of things, but first they had not understood the joke, they had missed the central point [*de clou*]. They were second-class, provincials, B-consumers who therefore deserved B-art. Hypocrisy may be an ingredient of all civilization, snobbery is a side effect of all art.[23]

The sacralization of offense that Grunberg describes in this passage is, in a sense, the opposite of Kundera's sacralization of literature. Whereas Kundera's sacralization of literature hinges on an agreement to consider literature intrinsically inoffensive, Grunberg's diagnosis of a sacralization of offense suggests an agreement to give and take offense. Artists agree to give offense because they want to be taken seriously, Grunberg submits, while their audience agrees to take offense out of "a deep need for reality [*echtheid*]."[24] However, Grunberg suggests that if you have already consented to being offended, taking offense is no longer necessary, and indeed, it seems that even if you may still act indignant, it may no longer be possible to "really" *feel* offended.

Grunberg is interested in the work of Topor because he sees Topor's work as offensive without participating in the sacralization of offense. In fact, Grunberg argues, Topor's work is offensive in part *because* it refuses the seriousness of this sacralization. Grunberg writes:

> [Topor] sees through pretences, he bids seriousness farewell, or rather the form of seriousness, because he saw it, I suspect, as an instrument of power. Partly for that reason, one must call him light as a feather, but precisely not in the sense of "void" [*nietig*]. Light as a feather as someone who keeps a distance to all power, even the power that some artists like to exercise.[25]

According to Grunberg, both seriousness and jokes have a form that makes them recognizable as such, which depends on the acceptance of a set of agreements, and Topor does not accept either of these sets of agreements. His work "[r]efuses to be serious, yet is also dead serious […]."[26] What makes it dead serious, Grunberg argues, is that unlike artists who have turned transgression into the norm, Topor takes the taboo seriously:

> The idea that one can give offense, and that it is useful to do so from time to time, requires a sincere belief in, and also a certain respect for the taboo. And the idea that one can question [*in twijfel trekken*] the taboo in a place governed by more or less strict rules and laws requires a certain amount of distance. Especially in that respect Topor's work proves to be fundamentally different from that of his colleagues. He takes the taboo seriously, he believes in it as in death, with an unconditionality that is moving.[27]

Grunberg suggests that turning transgression into the norm and instrumentalizing the taboo in a game of recognition that only takes the players seriously leads to excesses, such as artists who torture animals or themselves. But how exactly does Topor's "non-serious" work take the taboo seriously?

An interpretation of one of Topor's better known drawings, which is reproduced opposite the first page of Grunberg's essay, can help understand Grunberg's argument. A fist punches straight into a face that deforms like a feather pillow; the caption reads: "Would you give me a hand?" Topor's drawing might be said to take seriously the murder taboo which, as Emmanuel Levinas has argued, confronts us in the face of the other that is also a temptation to kill, by depicting the taboo's transgression as a joke, the word play on "giving someone a hand."[28] Sigmund Freud argued that jokes are a social game that allows for the expression of an unconscious content that otherwise needs to be repressed,[29] which in this case would be the desire to exploit, hurt, humiliate, and kill that Freud, too, believed lies hidden behind the command "Love thy neighbor as thyself" that presents itself in the neighbor's call for a helping hand.[30] However, Topor does not play by the rules of this social game: he does not accept what Grunberg calls the form of the joke, because the humorous caption to the drawing's graphic representation of extreme violence does not make the drawing inoffensive, and it is not even certain that the drawing is actually funny.

Grunberg's own aesthetic is similar to the aesthetic that he finds in Topor. Grunberg constantly touches taboos, playing with them and joking around with them, yet he does not turn transgression into the norm, instrumentalizing taboos in a sacred agreement of giving and taking offense with his readers. Like Topor, Grunberg does not follow the rules of the game: his work neither conforms to the conventional "form of seriousness" nor to the conventional "form of the joke." Countering both the sacralization of literature and the sacralization of offense, Grunberg's novels can be read as acts of profanation.

SECULARIZATION VERSUS PROFANATION

I borrow the concept of profanation from philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who, in his *Profanations* (originally published in Italian as *Profanazioni*, 2005), contrasts it to

the concept of secularization. According to Agamben, secularization is a form of repression, because it "[l]eaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another."[31] For instance, the political secularization of theological concepts such as sovereignty mobilizes a sacred model of exercising power. By contrast, profanation "[n]eutralizes what it profanes"; it "[d]eactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized."[32] Agamben conceptualizes profanation as the inverse of sacralization. Whereas sacralizing is the ritual act of setting apart, Agamben submits, of removing something from common use and transferring it to a separate, sacred sphere, profanation "[d]isenchants and returns to use what the sacred had separated and petrified."[33] Drawing from Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss's classic study of sacrifice,[34] Agamben notes that "one of the simplest forms of profanation occurs through contact [*contagione*] during the same sacrifice that effects and regulates the passage of the victim from the human to the divine sphere."[35] However, Agamben writes, following Émile Benveniste's 1947 essay, "Le jeu comme structure" (Play as structure),[36] "[t]he passage from the sacred to the profane can also come about by means of an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, reuse) of the sacred: namely, play," which "[f]rees and distracts humanity from the sphere of the sacred, without simply abolishing it."[37] According to Benveniste, the power of the sacred act resides in "[i]ts conjunction of the *myth* that enunciates the story and the *rite* that reproduces it."[38] By contrast, play, for Benveniste, is a "desacralizing operation" that breaks this conjunction of myth and rite:

> [Play as structure] has its origin in the sacred, of which it gives an inverse and broken image. If the sacred can be defined by a consubstantial unity of myth and rite, one could say that there is play when one performs only half of the sacred operation by translating only the myth into words or only the rite into acts. In this way, one is outside the divine and human sphere of efficiency.[39]

Using Agamben's and Benveniste's terminology, I will argue that *The Jewish Messiah* "translates" the "myth" of *Mein Kampf* into words, separating it, through "word play" – literary fiction – from the rites that sacralize it as the bible of evil and thus treat it as the "negative" founding text of the "order of efficiency" of post-World War II liberal societies that, when sacralizing the Holocaust as a secularized theology of evil, fail to confront the singularity of evil in the present.[40] Profaning the myth that the Holocaust represents transcendent evil, and profaning the sacralized conception of literature as an intrinsically inoffensive space where moral judgment is suspended, Grunberg's novels forge a complicity in the knowledge of the banality of evil.[41]

"TRANSLATING" *MEIN KAMPF*

Taboos that Grunberg touches throughout his work are taboos relating to the Holocaust. These taboos can be considered foundational to post-World War II liberal societies, especially Germany and the Netherlands. As the son of an Auschwitz survivor growing up in a country where the Jewish population was decimated by the Nazis (aided by a large number of Dutch institutions and individual collaborators), Grunberg was particularly exposed to the mobilizations and appropriations of these taboos in Dutch society, and he has been touching on these mobilizations and appropriations since his first novel, *Blauwe maandagen* [Blue Mondays] (1994).

In the chapter "Watching Some Shoah" ("Even Shoah kijken"), the protagonist and narrator of *Blue Mondays*, a recalcitrant Jewish high-school student who bears the same name as the author, describes the following scene: "The next Monday morning we would watch *Shoah* again, a little idea of the history teacher. Watching some *Shoah*. He had called me and said: 'If you want, you can stay home when we watch Shoah.'"[42] As "Grunberg" has just been suspended by the principal, he defiantly decides to get up early for the occasion:

> They were all watching that tedious movie. At the end, one bitch even started to cry [*janken*]. I swear. She started to cry. The next time I stayed home after all. I suspected that the teacher would start to cry as well, during the credits. He was capable of it. He was that type of guy. At the end of the year I ran into him again one time./ He said: "I never saw you in my class again."/ I said: "No, that's right, I thought you were still busy with that Shoah."[43]

The teacher's action in this scene could be considered as a sacrifice in the general sense described by Agamben, of an act of separation that transfers something from the profane to the sacred sphere.[44] The teacher separates "Grunberg" from the rest of the class, sacralizing him as a Jew and as what is sometimes called a second-generation Holocaust victim. "Grunberg's" responses can be read as acts of profanation, then. The word play on the distinction between *Shoah* (in italics, i.e., Claude Lanzmann's near 10-hour documentary film, 1985) and the Shoah (without italics) might be said to refuse "the form of seriousness" that turns a screening of a Holocaust movie into a collective performance of pious sentimentality solidifying a group that still treats Jews as (sacred) outsiders.[45] But "Grunberg's" humorous retort to the teacher ("I thought you were still busy with that Shoah") also refuses "the form of the joke" that would defuse tensions through cathartic laughter. By dismissing the movie as "tedious," i.e., on aesthetic grounds, "Grunberg" insists on his intellectual equality with the rest of the group, claiming the position of what Jacques Rancière has called "the emancipated spectator."[46] Yet although "Grunberg" is ridiculing the teacher's conflation of the movie and the event, no affirmative

position can be inferred from this passage about the "proper" way to discuss the Holocaust or to treat Jewish students in a high-school class about the Holocaust.

In the remainder of this article, I will analyze Grunberg's novel *The Jewish Messiah* (2004; English translation 2008). Among many other taboos, *The Jewish Messiah* touches and plays with three of the most sensitive subjects in contemporary Western European and Anglo-American liberal societies: the Holocaust and Nazism; anti-Semitism and philo-Semitism or Judeophilia; and Israel and Zionism. I will begin with a summary of *The Jewish Messiah*'s grotesque plot, including a number of citations that give an impression of the novel's style and tone.

The Jewish Messiah begins as follows:

> Because his grandfather had served, with sincere enthusiasm and great faith in progress, in the SS – the kind of man who wasn't afraid to roll up his sleeves, not the kind of wishy-washy grandpa who never got up from his desk, who stamped an official document now and then before hurrying home to his wife and children at five, no, a gentleman, one who understood death's handiwork without bothering his own family about it, […] – the grandson wished to serve a movement with enthusiasm and faith in progress.[47]

The only child of "well-bred and rather uncommunicative parents" in Basel, Switzerland, this grandson, 14-year-old, non-Jewish Xavier Radek, begins to frequent a synagogue and joins a Zionist youth association "after having a dream in which the phrase 'world Judaism' [*wereldjodendom*] appeared," reasoning that

> There were definitely not many young people who dreamed about world Judaism, and the fact that *he* did backed up his idea that he was different from others. Called. Chosen. Branded. […] Zionism was an ideal that fit him, a suit made to measure.[48]

He befriends one of the rabbi's sons, Awromele, who offers to translate a dirty joke into Yiddish, because "'When you speak Yiddish, you can tell the filthiest jokes in the tram and no one understands you.'"[49] Xavier is unable to come up with a dirty joke at that particular moment, but as he is rehearsing jokes from a joke book while waiting for Awromele on their next meeting – Awromele had pushed him: "It has to be a really filthy one. With a little clit in it, for instance"[50] – "Xavier was struck by a flash of inspiration that would change his life":

> Whenever anything shameless or filthy took place in the area of culture, at least one Jew was always involved, but the Great Yiddish Novel remained unwritten. And if something didn't happen fast, it

> would remain unwritten for all time. He would write the Great Yiddish Novel. To provide structural comfort for the Jews.[51]

Soon after, on their way to a senile Leninist who will perform one final circumcision in his filthy apartment-cum-kosher cheese shop, Xavier asks Awromele if he ever read *Mein Kampf*; he found a copy in his mother's drawer, hidden between photographs of his grandfather. Awromele has never heard of the book, but opines, after Xavier explains that it sold more than 10 million copies worldwide: "It's not a bad title. If it had been called *Mein Hund* or *Mein Weib* it would never have sold much. *Mein Haus* would have been a disaster too, marketingwise. Has it been translated into Yiddish?"[52] When Xavier responds that it has not, Awromele, who has already been teaching Xavier some Yiddish, proposes that they translate *Mein Kampf* into Yiddish together, shocking Xavier not by this proposal but by professing to have "a nose for business" ("That's anti-Semitic. Besides that, it's not idiomatic," Xavier corrects him) and for suggesting to use the profits to "go to a whorehouse together" ("Lust, the lowest kind of lust a man can have. […] 'But you're one of the chosen people,' Xavier said, and his voice cracked").[53] The translation project continues throughout the novel.

During Xavier's circumcision, which is preceded by Awromele's fellatio of Xavier – Awromele wants to taste the smegma collected under the foreskin of an uncircumcised penis – the half-blind cheese merchant accidentally hits Xavier's left testicle with his blunt knife. The subsequent loss of his testicle is a strong indication that Xavier begins to resemble Hitler. The botched circumcision causes a moral outrage that leads to the brutal arrest of the old cheese merchant, who is dubbed "pedophile Lenin" by the tabloids, and to a candlelight procession that culminates in the destruction of the cheese merchant's apartment by the indignant mob, a scene reminiscent of *Kristallnacht*. A Committee of Vigilant Parents is set up, and Xavier's mother is made honorary member, despite the fact that she had almost let Xavier bleed and freeze to death on her doorstep when he came home severely wounded – she believed, for no good reason, that he had been drinking and wanted to teach him a lesson – and had then waited more than a day before taking him to the emergency room because she was afraid of gossip. Awromele's father, whose credentials as a rabbi have been called into question, "rescinds" the cheese merchant's "membership in the Jewish community" and sets up a Committee of Vigilant Jews, explaining to a sex worker: "I didn't have any choice. I can't protect Mr. Schwartz. If I did that, I would only be encouraging anti-Semitism. Then there would be no stopping it".[54] (The cheese merchant soon hangs himself in his cell.)

The amputated testicle is put in a glass jar of formaldehyde in order to assist Xavier "in the process of mourning," and a picture of Xavier with the jar, published in a local newspaper with the caption, "Victim with Testicle," is voted Photo of the Year.[55] Xavier starts talking to his testicle: "I'm going to call you King David. […] King David was the King of the Jews, and someday you will be, too."[56] Indeed, via a

detour through Amsterdam, where he fails to get admitted to art school as a painter – another obvious parallel with Hitler's biography – Xavier moves to Israel with Awromele, who has become his lover, where he becomes a speech writer for the Likud Party, then a member of the Tel Aviv City Council, and ultimately prime minister, whipping up the crowds with his testicle in a jar: "'King David can be your king, too.'/ 'Yes,' shouted voters from all walks of life, 'make him our king, too!'"[57] Hailed by *The Economist* as "the miracle from Jerusalem" for his effective employment policies (building highways etc.), while *Time Magazine* runs a photograph of the testicle on the cover with the caption "Is This the Redeemer?" Xavier, now called "ha-Radek," strikes cynical secret deals about numbers of casualties with the leader of Hamas over mint tea. In the end, Xavier turns against "the West" and begins to sell nuclear weapons to random countries, which provokes a general reappraisal of Hitler's "war against the Jews" as a "pre-emptive war." In the climactic final chapter, which includes an actual Yiddish translation of a paragraph from the 10th chapter of *Mein Kampf* where Hitler calls "the Jew" a parasite and elaborates on a description by Arthur Schopenhauer ("Sjopenhoiern") of "the Jew" as the "grandmaster of the lie" ("der 'groiser maister foen lign'"),[58] Xavier withdraws in a bunker where he shoots his dogs, sets off a nuclear attack (one of the rockets has "greetings [*groetjes*] from Anne Frank" painted on it), and whispers to the remains of Awromele, who has been killed and torn to pieces by a lynch mob in a popular uprising:

> "I came to comfort. But the only comfort you people have is destruction."/ He held up the head, pressed it against him, planted hundreds of little kisses on the burned crust. "Awromele," he said. "Are you listening? Our only comfort is destruction."[59]

The Jewish Messiah is of course in part a parody of *Mein Kampf*.[60] Like *Mein Kampf*, the novel begins "in the parental home," to quote the title of Hitler's first chapter, and introduces a teenage protagonist who is in search of something meaningful to do with his life and becomes obsessed with Jews.[61] The description of Xavier's grandfather in the opening paragraph, which I cited above, alludes to Hitler's pathetic repetition, in his first chapter, of his resolve not to become a functionary like his father: "I too wanted to become 'something,' however – absolutely not a functionary [*auf keinen Fall Beamter*]."[62] *The Jewish Messiah* is full of allusions to *Mein Kampf*, and Hitler's ideology is echoed by various characters. For instance, Xavier's explanation to Awromele of what his grandfather did, "He cut off the dead leaves," echoes Hitler's heavy use of organicist and eugenicist imagery in passages arguing that nature's supposed concentration on the *Nachwuchs* (second growth or new blood) as the "carrier of the species" (*Träger des Arts*) should be followed in politics.[63] But it is not only Xavier and his parents who echo *Mein Kampf*, but also some

of the Jewish characters. For instance, Awromele's father tells Xavier that "The Jews need *Lebensraum*, too."[64]

A strong taboo rests on *Mein Kampf* in the Netherlands, Germany, and various other countries, where it has been legally prohibited to republish the German original or the Dutch translation, as well as to publish any new translation. Until 2015, seventy years after Hitler's death, the prohibition on republishing the German original and on publishing new translations was grounded in a copyright claim by the Bavarian Ministry of Finance, based on the fact that Munich was Hitler's last official residence. In the Netherlands, the prohibition was grounded in the copyright claim to the Dutch translation by the Dutch state, which was based on the bankruptcy of the Dutch publishing house that published it. These legal prohibitions were not merely symbolic: for instance, when a Turkish translation became a bestseller in Turkey in 2007, the state of Bavaria successfully sued the publishers before a Turkish court and managed to prevent further print and sale of the book.[65] In the Netherlands, selling *Mein Kampf* has also led to criminal convictions based on an article in the Criminal Code that, among other things, prohibits selling materials containing utterances that are offensive to a group of people on account of their race or religion or incites to hatred, discrimination, or violence against such a group.[66] However, the Amsterdam district court argued in a 2014 judgment that a criminal conviction of the owner of the "Totalitarian Art Gallery" for selling copies of the Dutch translation of *Mein Kampf* would violate his freedom of speech under the European Convention on Human Rights, because of the context in which the books were offered for sale and because the text can now be accessed freely on the internet, so that a criminal conviction of the owner would serve little practical purpose.[67] In both Germany and the Netherlands, the prohibition on republishing *Mein Kampf* periodically leads to heated discussions. In the Netherlands, anti-Islam politician Geert Wilders has repeatedly proposed to ban the Qur'an on the ground that it would contain as much hate speech as *Mein Kampf*. The suggestion by a Social Democratic politician that the ban on Hitler's book should be lifted so that this ludicrous discussion could be put to rest caused a wave of indignation and was rejected by a majority in parliament.[68]

The Jewish Messiah plays with the Dutch and Bavarian copyright claims by including a word of thanks after the final page: "The publisher would like to thank the heirs of A. Hitler for their kind permission to include here excerpts from *Mijn kamp*, published in Amsterdam in 1938, Yiddish translation by Willy Brill," a note that contradicts Xavier's assurance to Awromele that they will not have to worry about copyright because "the heirs of the You-Know-Who estate are all dead."[69] The contradiction between the word of thanks and Xavier's statement, which both contradict the actual copyright claims to *Mein Kampf*, signals the difference between the novel and its plot, which also show a remarkable similarity. I mentioned above that Xavier decides to write the "Great Yiddish Novel" "to provide structural comfort for the Jews," and ends up translating *Mein Kampf* into Yiddish with Awromele,

as well as attempting to redeem a suffering people, an ambition that is, of course, at the heart of *Mein Kampf*. In fact, *The Jewish Messiah* itself was originally published not only as *De joodse messias*, but also as *Grote Jiddische Roman* (Great Yiddish Novel).[70] *Grote Jiddische Roman* was published as the 13th title in the "De Jiddische Bibliotheek" (The Yiddish Library) series of publisher Vassallucci, a series that had been publishing Dutch translations of Yiddish novels and poetry since 1997.[71] This series seems to exemplify precisely the interest in Yiddish or Jewish culture that Xavier contemplates when he decides to write the Great Yiddish Novel (it is the author who inserts sarcasm in his representation of Xavier's thoughts through free indirect discourse, because Xavier himself has no sense of humor):

> [The Jews] had filthy Yiddish jokes, translated by Awromele; they had Yiddish music, melancholy songs once sung by partisans but today performed by people who, though not Jewish themselves, had a great deal of affinity with the Jews, and who therefore sang in Yiddish while accompanying themselves on violin and guitar. In that way, the leftovers of a decimated culture could be warmed over and dished up to the public in plastic containers. Only when a culture had been decimated did people become interested in it, and Xavier couldn't blame people for that. Staring at mishaps, that was people's favorite pastime. But did they have a Great Yiddish Novel? […] if something didn't happen fast, it would remain unwritten for all time.[72]

Grote Jiddische Roman was actually the last title to appear in the Jiddische Bibliotheek series, which was discontinued in 2004. That is, the series ended with a book that contains a translation of a passage from *Mein Kampf* into Yiddish and that parodies the tetragrammaton in the Hebrew Scriptures by letting Xavier and his mother consistently refer to Hitler as "You-Know-Who" (the Dutch *Je-weet-wel-wie* is also somewhat homophonic to the word Jahweh), and by having Xavier refer to *Mein Kampf* as "the Book of books."[73]

If Nazis consider *Mein Kampf* the "Book of books," the legally sanctioned taboo on *Mein Kampf* in liberal societies risks preserving this sacred status by treating it as the "bible of evil." *The Jewish Messiah* could then be said to profane *Mein Kampf*, countering sacralizations of the book that turn the imperative, "never again Auschwitz" into a political theology. *The Jewish Messiah* reverses its protagonist's translation project. Instead of "elevating" Yiddish to the status of a sacred language by using it to express the Nazi bible, as Xavier tries to do with Awromele, *The Jewish Messiah* "translates" *Mein Kampf* from what philologist Victor Klemperer has called "LTI" (*Lingua Tertii Imperii*, the Language of the Third Reich)[74] into very colloquial Dutch; from a modern epic where everything has meaning in light of the "destiny" (*Bestimmung*) and "fate" (*Schicksal*) posited in the first sentence (for instance, Hitler's voice lessons as a teenager prefigure his rhetorical talents; the

fact that he was an outdoor kid prefigures his concern for *Lebensraum*)[75] into a novel full of meaningless or trivial details (for instance, repeated descriptions of the tastes and smells of kosher cheeses); from monological testimony into dialogical fiction; and from serious manifesto into ironic farce or dirty joke.

The Jewish Messiah profanes any transcendent notion of evil, confronting the "banality of evil" with irony. With its realistic representations of violence, *The Jewish Messiah* transgresses the ban on graven images by throwing those representations in its readers' faces in graphic detail, often including a humorous element. Like the drawing by Topor analyzed above, *The Jewish Messiah* depicts violence against a face in multiple scenes. For instance, when four male teenagers catch Xavier and Awromele having sex in the park for the first time, they spit in Awromele's face, after Xavier flees the scene, and proceed to kick him:

> [t]he tallest boy took a few steps back. Then he ran up and kicked Awromele in the ear as hard as he could, as though Awromele's head were a football. Awromele was too late to raise his arm and protect the side of his head. Blood came dripping out of his right ear.[76]

These boys also repeatedly force one of Awromele's younger sisters to give them oral sex:

> The girl was kneeling in front of him, in a corner of the schoolyard with trees all around and bushes on which cheerful berries hung in spring. The girl gagged. The braces got in the way, but she probably would have gagged even without the brace. […] "You are ugly. That's a euphemism; you are hideous. Yet we still love you […]." Then he took the girl by the ears and moved her head back and forth as though it were a machine.[77]

There is something offensive about Grunberg's humorous tone in these scenes, but it may be precisely this tone that provokes readers to contemplate real instances of, among other things, LGBTQ bashing, bullying, and rape in the present.[78]

Grunberg's novels steer away from the "secularist" position that what can be offended must be offended because what can be offended is irrational. His novels also steer away from the mandate actively to avoid offense in the name of tolerance and respect for cultural difference. Finally, his novels steer away from the position that communication, discussion, and critique are only possible in a sphere that lies beyond offense.[79] Contrary to the secularist position and the idea that communication is only possible in a sphere that lies beyond offense, Grunberg assumes that affective investments in shared norms and ideals are essential to culture and communication, and that we are not beyond offense, nor should we be. But contrary to the "tolerance" position, Grunberg seeks to contest the self-evidence of whatever anyone finds offensive.

The epigraph or motto of *The Jewish Messiah* (which is curiously left out of the otherwise excellent English translation) reads: "Hope dies last," which suggests that the novel will affirm the uplifting idea that as long as there is life, there is hope. In fact, however, *The Jewish Messiah* develops a story line about Awromele's youngest sister whose naïve faith that the messiah will come as a pelican stands in stark opposition to the false prophecies of her father, the rabbi, who is an opportunistic crook. Throughout the novel, this little girl figures as the one spark of hope in an otherwise nihilistic universe. However, the novel ends, after Xavier sets off the nuclear attack, with the girl, who is now a young mother, pointing out the window to her daughter, whose mouth is covered with chocolate milk, that she can now see the pelican, which, readers know, is in fact a nuclear weapon. It is impossible to read this scene as a "serious" lesson urging us to give up all hope and simply adopt a "realistic" world view. For this final scene confirms Xavier's anti-Semitic pronouncements, in the sentences before, to Awromele that "your only comfort is destruction," with the repetition in the first person plural: "our only comfort is destruction."[80]

In contrast to Milan Kundera's sacralization of literature, there can be no suspension of moral judgment for readers of *The Jewish Messiah*. But the novel also avoids the sacralization of offense, because Grunberg can never be taken entirely seriously in his many transgressions. It is impossible to have a good cathartic laugh about the book and feel relieved that the novel's many touchy subjects have finally been taken out of the taboo sphere, so that you can have a "civil" conversation about them and discuss "reasonable" solutions to "real" problems. But it is also impossible to gratify one's desire for authenticity by acting indignant whenever the novel touches a taboo, because that would simply reiterate the often postulated self-evidence of evil that the novel constantly undermines. No prophecies are to be derived from *The Jewish Messiah*, then, but Grunberg's sustained meditations on nihilism cannot exactly be called nihilistic either. Unless we want to read Grunberg's novel as a "carnival of relativity," taboos matter, but lose their self-evidence in *The Jewish Messiah*. Instead, the novel provokes its readers to reflect on the question by what exactly we should feel offended.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

1. Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Vintage, 1988); Milan Kundera, "Le jour où Panurge ne fera plus rire," *l'Infini* 39 (1992): 33–50 (present author's translation).
2. Kundera, "Jour où Panurge ne fera plus rire," 34.
3. Ibid., 35.
4. Ibid., 47.
5. Ibid., 46.
6. Ibid., 47.
7. François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. M. A. Screech (New York: Penguin, 2006), 203. The French reads: "[…] Et, le lisant, ne vous scandalisez/ Il ne contient mal ne infection/ Vray est

qu'icy peu de perfection/ Vous apprendrez, si non en cas de rire."

8. "The case of *The Satanic Verses* may be one of the biggest category mistakes in literary history"; Salman Rushdie, "In Good Faith," in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta, 1991), 393–414, at 409.
9. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 109.
10. Kundera, "Jour où Panurge ne fera plus rire," 36–37.
11. Talal Asad, "Ethnography, Literature, and Politics: Some Readings and Uses of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*," in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 269–306.
12. Ibid., 283.
13. Ibid., 290, 294.
14. Ibid., 294–96.
15. Shoshana Felman, "The Rhetoric of Seduction," in *The Literary Speech Act*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 29–32.
16. Asad, "Ethnography, Literature, and Politics," 293–24.
17. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Vol. XVIII* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1977), 213–310, at 223.
18. Asad discusses a critique of seduction in his essay on the notorious "Danish cartoons": Talal Asad, "Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism," in Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 14–57.
19. Arnon Grunberg, *De joodse messias* (Amsterdam: Vassallucci, 2004); trans. Sam Garrett as *The Jewish Messiah* (New York: Penguin, 2008). I have occasionally slightly modified Garrett's excellent translation.
20. Grunberg/Garrett, *Jewish Messiah*, 46.
21. Ibid., 49.
22. Ibid., 50.
23. Arnon Grunberg, "anstoot geven en aanstoot nemen," in *Roland Topor: Romans, verhalen, tekeningen en foto's*, ed. Arnon Grunberg (Amsterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditmar, 2007), 9–19, at 15 (present author's translation).
24. Ibid., 16.
25. Ibid., 13–14.
26. Ibid., 11.
27. Ibid., 16.
28. For instance, Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961).
29. Sigmund Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*, in *Gesammelte Werke VI*, ed. Anna Freud (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999), 204–05.
30. "The readily disavowed element of reality behind all this is that humans are not gentle creatures in need of affection, who, at the most, are capable of defending themselves if they are attacked, but that a powerful share of aggressiveness is also to be reckoned among their instinctual endowments. As a result, their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also a temptation to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his labor power without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him"; Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989), 68–69 (translation modified). In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud had already argued that "the basis of taboo is a prohibited action, for performing which a strong inclination exists in the unconscious"; Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1950), 41.
31. Giorgio Agamben, *Profanazioni* (2005); trans. Jeff Fort as *Profanations* (New York: Zone, 2007), 74.
32. Agamben/Fort, *Profanations*.
33. Ibid.
34. Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, trans. W. D. Halls (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).
35. Agamben/Fort, *Profanations*, 74.
36. Émile Benveniste, "Le jeu comme structure," in *Deucalion* 2 (1947): 161–67 (present author's translation).
37. Agamben/Fort, *Profanations*, 75–76.
38. Benveniste, "Jeu comme structure," 165.
39. Ibid.
40. Yra van Dijk also reads the irony in *The Jewish Messiah* as contesting the "sacralization of the Shoah"; Yra van Dijk, "Uitblinken in overleven: De erfenis van de shoah bij Arnon Grunberg," in *Het leven volgens Arnon Grunberg: De wereld als poppenkast*, ed. Johan Goud (Utrecht: Klement/Pelckmans, 2010), 74–104, at 75. Grunberg himself has referred to the sacralization of the Shoah: Arnon Grunberg, *Het verraad van de tekst* (Amsterdam: Nijgh en Van Ditmar, 2009).
41. Cf. Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil* [1957], trans. Alastair Hamilton (New York: Marion Boyars, 1985), viii; and Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), which, like *The Jewish Messiah*, uses irony as an antidote to thoughtlessness.

42. Arnon Grunberg, *Blauwe maandagen* (Amsterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditmar, 1994), 91 (present author's translation); Arnon Grunberg, *Blue Mondays* (1997).
43. Grunberg, *Blauwe maandagen*, 91.
44. Yra van Dijk and Matthijs Ponte have observed that sacrifice is an ongoing theme in Grunberg's writings; Yra van Dijk and Matthijs Ponte, "De schrijver is een pelikaan: Offerplaatsen in het werk van Arnon Grunberg," in *Dietsche Warande and Belfort* 154, no. 1 (2009): 52–69.
45. Apart from ignoring the play with italics, the English translation simply leaves out the word "that" (*die*) in the final sentence of the passage: "I thought you were all still busy watching *Shoah*"; Arnon Grunberg, *Blue Mondays*, trans. Arnold Pomerans and Erica Pomerans (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997), 90.
46. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (New York: Verso, 2009).
47. Grunberg/Garrett, *Jewish Messiah*, 1.
48. Ibid., 5–6.
49. Ibid., 12.
50. Ibid., 17.
51. Ibid., 23.
52. Ibid., 55.
53. Ibid., 56–57.
54. Ibid., 141.
55. Ibid., 142.
56. Ibid., 148.
57. Ibid., 426.
58. Ibid., 467.
59. Ibid., 470.
60. I am using the term "parody" here in Linda Hutcheon's broad sense as "a form of imitation [...] characterized by ironic inversion"; Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 6. As Grunberg himself has noted, *The Jewish Messiah* is also loosely based on Edgard Hilsenrath's grotesque 1971 novel *Der Nazi & der Friseur* (Munich: DTV, 2006).
61. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, Franz Eher, 1943) (present author's translation).
62. Ibid., 17.
63. Grunberg/Garrett, *Jewish Messiah*, 58–59. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 29.
64. Grunberg/Garrett, *Jewish Messiah*, 11.
65. "Türkei verbietet Adolf Hitlers 'Mein Kampf'," *Die Zeit*, August 23, 2007.
66. Art. 137e of the Dutch Criminal Code.
67. Amsterdam District Court, November 21, 2014, case no. 13/659226-14, ECLI:NL: RBAMS:2014:7866.
68. Sara Berkeljon, "Mein Kampf: Plasterk bindt in," *de Volkskrant*, September 13, 2007.
69. Grunberg/Garrett, *Jewish Messiah*, 56.
70. Arnon Grunberg, *Grote Jiddische Roman* (Amsterdam: Vassallucci, 2004).
71. Jiddische *Roman* is the 13th title in De Jiddische Bibliotheek. For an overview of the publications of De Jiddische Bibliotheek until 2001, see Martijn Meijer, "Zweten is een joodse aangelegenheid: Willy Brill en het thuisgevoel van De Jiddische Bibliotheek," *NRC Handelsblad*, December 14, 2001.
72. Grunberg/Garrett, *Jewish Messiah*, at 23.
73. Ibid., 467.
74. Victor Klemperer, *Die unbewältigte Sprache: Aus dem Notizbuch eines Philologen "LTI"* (Darmstadt: Joseph Melzer, 1946).
75. "Today it seems to me a fortunate destiny that fate assigned Braunau am Inn as my place of birth [*Als glückliche Bestimmung gilt es mir heute, daû das Schicksal mir zum Geburtsort gerade Braunau am Inn zuwies*]"; Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 1.
76. Grunberg/Garrett, *Jewish Messiah*, 204–05.
77. Ibid., 278.
78. LGBTQ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer.
79. This has been the position of the European Court of Human Rights since *Otto-Preminger-Institut v. Austria*, App. No. 13470/87 Eur. Ct. H.R. (1994). For my analysis of this judgment, see Michiel Bot, "The Right to Offend? Contested Speech Acts and Critical Democratic Practice," *Law and Literature* 24, no. 2 (2012): 232–64.
80. Grunberg/Garrett, *Jewish Messiah*, 470. On hope in Grunberg's work, see also Erik Borgman, "De onontkoombaarheid van de hoop: Grunberg lezen als geestelijke oefening," in Goud, *Het leven volgens Arnon Grunberg*, 105–25.

Michiel Bot is at the Department of Public Law, Jurisprudence and Legal History, Tilburg Law School, Tilburg, the Netherlands. michiel.bot@uvt.nl