



REVISITING
ZERO-HOUR 1945
THE EMERGENCE
OF POSTWAR
GERMAN CULTURE



edited by
STEPHEN BROCKMANN
FRANK TROMMLER



VOLUME 1

American Institute for Contemporary German Studies
The Johns Hopkins University



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HUMANITIES PROGRAM
REPORT
VOLUME 1

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FOREWORD

Since its inception, AICGS has incorporated the study of German literature and culture as a part of its mandate to help provide a comprehensive understanding of contemporary Germany. The nature of Germany's past and present requires nothing less than an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of German society and culture. Within its research and public affairs programs, the analysis of Germany's intellectual and cultural traditions and debates has always been central to the Institute's work.

At the time the Berlin Wall was about to fall, the Institute was awarded a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to help create an endowment for its humanities programs. In 1994, that endowment was established as the Harry & Helen Gray Humanities Program in recognition of the generosity of the Chairman of the Institute's Board of Trustees and of his wife. The Institute quickly recruited Professor Frank Trommler of the Department of German at the University of Pennsylvania to direct the Institute's programs in the humanities. The result was a series of new seminars, conferences, and fellowships created in 1995, which have generated new publications in the Institute's Humanities Publication series.

This Institute takes pride in publishing the results of the workshop on "Zero Hour 1945," organized by Frank Trommler and Stephen Brockmann, 1995 Fellow, AICGS Harry & Helen Gray Humanities Program. Collected here is a series of thoughtful and acute interventions in the ongoing debate about German identity, in which Goethe's nearly 200-year old question—"Deutschland? Aber wo liegt es?" (Germany? But where is that?)—is addressed through reflections on literature and politics.

Undertaken by leading young scholars in their respective fields, these studies were commissioned with the aim of illuminating crucial issues that cannot be captured readily in their integrity and urgency by any one of academia's disciplinary templates. AICGS has set itself the goal of identifying such issues and creating an environment in which they can be systematically discussed and further developed.

Resonating through all spheres of life in "unified" Germany, the themes associated with German identity are as timely and relevant on both sides of the Atlantic as the underlying organizing concept of identity is elusive. In reassessing the foundation myths of the Federal Republic, these contributions provide useful criteria for evaluating the cultural dynamic of the "new," post-1990 Germany. Along the way, they illuminate a broad range of contemporary debates that will

define Germany's place in Europe and the world for the foreseeable future. Among the more obvious ones are: the character of German democracy and the functioning of its political institutions; the design of EU institutions; the limits of the sacrifices Germans will be willing to make for European regional integration; the geographical inclusiveness of this project, attitudes toward participation in multilateral military operations; the content of the "European citizenship" created by the Treaty on European Union and relatedly, the definition of and attitude towards "foreigners."

These connections point to the ongoing research and public affairs agenda of AICGS. Our resident scholars, associates, and visitors are pressing on, inter alia, with analyses of anti-fascism as a foundation myth of the German Democratic Republic, the role of historical memory in the formulation and conduct of foreign policy, the transformation of the German political party system after 1989, and the role of Germany in Europe as architect, model and bridge.

We wish to express our deep gratitude to all contributors to this volume, and in particular to Frank Trommler and Stephen Brockmann for organizing the conference which created this new AICGS Seminar Paper.

Carl Lankowski
Research Director

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May 1996

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A B O U T T H E A U T H O R S

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INTRODUCTION

Frank Trommler

The concept of May 1945 as a Zero Hour (*Stunde Null*) has served as a shorthand for the devastations in both material and spiritual terms that characterized Germany at the end of World War II. Postwar writers such as Heinrich Böll and Alfred Andersch who took the lead in the moral reconstruction of German culture referred to this Zero Hour as their true point of origin. For a long time scholars of postwar literature and culture in West Germany anchored their findings in the experience of a moral, political, and cultural tabula rasa after the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany.

Fifty years after this breakdown of a whole nation, when continuities with earlier developments have long become apparent and the postwar period is considered to belong to history, the notion “Zero Hour 1945” deserves a fresh look. If anything, the breakdown of the communist block in 1989/91 has rekindled our interest in those turning points of history that continue to define whole societies in their aspirations and identities. In fact, the concept of Zero Hour was used again in response to the breakdown of the communist regime in East Germany in 1989. While it seemed less suited for the social realm, it indicated the sense of rupture in those areas that had carried most of the regime’s ideological freight: communication, art, education, and culture. The suddenness of the regime’s demise made the metaphor of Point Zero particularly cogent. However, as soon as the term began to circulate, it met with strong resistance. One of the fiercest critics of the communist state who left the German Democratic Republic long before the Wall came down, Hans Joachim Schädlich, summed up the objections in these words: “To examine guilt, to request answers, to demand atonement, to punish if necessary—how can evil be made good again, if forgetting is proclaimed in the so-called zero hour?”¹

Schädlich’s disapproval of the term Point Zero is understandable in view of the hardship which the communist system, complete with Wall and Stasi, imposed on millions of people. It is all the more understandable in a country whose regime, before 1945, inflicted incomparable sufferings on other countries and a whole race. There can be no return to this term without invoking the ambiguous spirit with which, after World War II, the metaphor for a new beginning was transformed into a concept of social, economic, cultural, and

moral recovery. Many Germans who had been deeply implicated in the crimes of the Nazi regime claimed, by incorporating the term into the everyday vernacular, a new start, a clean slate.

And yet the concept of Zero Hour, as it was used by writers and writers-to-be, also expressed the loss of cultural continuities and aesthetic traditions on which writers of an older generation—Thomas Mann, Rainer Maria Rilke, Hermann Hesse among others—had been able to build their careers. Initially this loss was couched in existentialist terms, a gripping confirmation of the vacuity of reality after all facades have fallen; but writers soon realized that a mere existentialist articulation did not help them gain or regain a hold of the lost literary mastery. If a recovery was possible, it had to include a confession of this loss in order to legitimate the feeble attempts at writing prose. Heinrich Böll's often quoted statement from his "Frankfurt Lectures" marks the difficulty of this beginning: "Our literature has no towns. The enormous, often laborious efforts of postwar literature consisted of finding towns and neighborhoods again. One has not yet understood what it meant in the year 1945 to write only half a page of German prose."² In this spirit, the concept of Point Zero—together with the metaphor "*Kahlschlag*" (clear-cutting), introduced by Wolfgang Iser—served as a signal for a new aesthetic and moral beginning, indicating that despair and deprivation had to be addressed in order to clear the terrain for a new kind of post-Nazi literature.

This volume, centered around Stephen Brockmann's illuminating essay, "German Culture at the Zero Hour," traces the development of West German literature between 1945 and 1989 insofar as it oriented itself toward this historical caesura. The papers were presented at the workshop of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies in Washington, "Germany, Zero Hour 1945: Myth or Reality? A New Generation Explores German Postwar Culture," on May 12, 1995. Stephen Brockmann sets the agenda with his thoughtful exploration of the moral, political, and aesthetic issues that the younger generation of writers faced after 1945. As a scholar of a new younger generation, Brockmann shows patience with the self-stylization of the writers who rallied around Group 47 as champions of a new German literature, yet he does not divert attention from the fact that the concept Zero Hour, promoting a common origin and providing positive reinforcement, was associated with failure: "The Zero Hour is present as a felt absence, as something that did not

occur.” Brockmann maintains, however, that this absence was gradually filled by the late 1950s as writers learned to analyze and confront society’s complacency with the economic take-off and its amnesia toward the Nazi past.

Sabine von Dirke, less patient with this slow awakening, shifts the focus to the political and intellectual upheavals of the 1960s as a “make-up session” for the Zero Hour. As she credits the generation of the 1960s with liberalizing West German society and anchoring democratic structures in its midst, von Dirke rejects the view that the new and true Zero Hour for German literature and culture came with the unification of 1990. Like her, Thomas Kniesche takes issue with the much-debated articles in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in which Frank Schirrmacher in 1990 attacked both Group 47 and the generation of 1968 for claiming leadership in the moral and intellectual recovery of the Federal Republic. Kniesche dismantles Schirrmacher’s projection of a stable entity called “postwar German literature,” pointing to the breaks and ruptures which were caused by different generational dispositions toward the Nazi past. He argues that literature had lost its central role as a moral institution by the late 1960s, giving way to different forms of public reckoning.

The fact that writers, especially those of Group 47, were able to assume a widely visible public role in the 1950s and 1960s was recognized in the discussion at the Washington workshop, but not without second thoughts concerning the lasting qualities of their works. One issue which has always been part of the weighing of moral versus aesthetic achievements in post-World War II poetry received a new evaluation by Neil Donahue: Adorno’s critique of writing poetry after Auschwitz. In his tightly argued paper, Donahue delineates an understanding of Adorno’s—admittedly misleading—lines in “Cultural Criticism and Society” that concurs with Günter Grass’s reading, according to which Adorno’s forbidding remarks are seen as an imposing, yet galvanizing standard for the truly probing writer. What most contemporaries interpreted as a verdict indicates a route to poetry whose challenge is linked to its self-realization after Auschwitz.

How much did politicians exploit the notion of a *tabula rasa*? Jeffrey Herf confirms the assumption that West German politics, especially when seen in the light of Konrad Adenauer’s chancellorship, opted for—critically

filtered—continuities with an earlier German democracy. But Herf leaves no doubts as to which party tried to make the experience of Nazism, the failure of the Germans, the basis of its postwar agenda. Illuminating the plight of Kurt Schumacher and Ernst Reuter in striving for a moral recovery of Germany of which *Wiedergutmachung* toward the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust was to be the keystone, Herf shows a deep sense of tragedy as a political motivator within the Social Democratic Party. He puts his finger on the dilemma faced by both Adenauer und the Social Democrats: that the overriding concern with the Nazi past would hinder the acceptance of the fragile democracy among the Germans. By deciding to forego a sweeping indictment of the perpetrators of the Nazi crimes in order not to derail the democratization efforts, Adenauer allowed continuities from the Nazi years to exist in West Germany which gave the concept of Zero Hour a utopian and, as such, an oppositional ring.

The lively discussion at the workshop confirmed the premise that the events of 1989/90 have provided new incentives and critical perspectives for a fresh look at the phenomenon of “Zero Hour 1945.” Whatever shadow the unification of the two German states will cast on future assessments of modern German history and culture, there can be little doubt that these events give shape to a critical consciousness that differs from the historical and moral perceptions of earlier decades. And whatever intellectual fashions will determine the self-understanding of future generations, the experience of 1989/90 already functions as a kind of investiture of a new critical *modus operandi* vis-à-vis modern Germany and Europe, an investiture with which the younger generation is forming its own profile. Having observed, with their own eyes, the breakdown of the postwar order as an awesome paradigm of history in the making, younger scholars feel authorized to determine what has constituted history in earlier periods. Despite its shortcomings, Frank Schirrmacher’s attack on the established memorialization of the achievements of postwar German writers has been a useful reminder of the need for new critical perspectives in this realm.

As someone who involved himself in an earlier dismantling of the concept of Zero Hour 1945, I might add some observations about the circumstances under which literary scholars took up this topic around 1970. Thomas Kniesche’s reference to Enzensberger’s assessment of 1968 in “Commonplaces of the Newest Literature” that the public engagement of postwar writers was giving way to the political activism of the younger generation is well taken, as

is Sabine von Dirke's insistence that the generation of 1968 could not but question the myth of a new beginning of literature from the ruins of war. And yet, these and similar references to the sudden awareness of the changing roles of literature which emerged in the late 1960s fail to account for the fact that embracing the new presentism did not automatically entail a new interest and understanding of the past. This operation, which hardly expressed a public exigency, had to be instigated and disseminated within the structures of established academic fields—in this case with the direct intent of renegotiating the relationship of history and the present within Germanistics. Today we rarely remember the enormous chasm between *Germanistik*, the institutionalized study of literature in history, and the literary criticism of the day, institutionalized in *Feuilletons*, journals, and the radio. Although the meetings of Group 47, the works of Böll, Grass, Lenz, Walser, Johnson, Bachmann, and Enzensberger, had won over the public discourse on literature and its effects, most *Germanisten* saw little reason to transfer insights or criteria from this sphere into their *Wissenschaft*. Thus, renegotiating the relationship of history and the present meant two operations: on the one hand, overcoming the self-stylization by which a whole generation of writers projected itself in the robes of historical newcomers, and on the other, applying the methods of textual criticism and historical contextualization to their work. Once this route was taken, the concept of Zero Hour proved to be hard to maintain, as Hans Mayer pointed out.³ When I undertook an inquiry into the literary continuities, a surprising closeness of the aesthetic practices of writers after 1945 to those developed around 1930 came to light.⁴ Through the subsequent research of Hans Dieter Schäfer, a more or less coherent aesthetics of non-fascist writers between 1930 and 1960 gained contours.⁵ Following these aesthetic currents from the period before Nazism to their fading out in the 1960s led to a different periodization of German literature at mid-century. The much discussed special volume, *Literaturmagazin 7: Nachkriegsliteratur*, which brought together writers, Germanists, and literary critics, presented a forum for such revaluations.

At the same time, West German *Germanisten* and literary critics began to show some interest in East German writing as a literature *sui generis* which claimed its own continuity with the socialist literature of the 1930s. Writers who had to go into exile after 1933 and were rarely integrated into postwar German literary life received more attention as well. Except for Thomas Mann,

Carl Zuckmayer and a few others, emigré authors had rarely been recognized as a source of literary inspiration and continuity as long as the literary achievements before 1945 were shrouded by the veil of catastrophe. And yet, despite the tardiness in recognizing the cultural and aesthetic continuities between pre-Nazi and post-Nazi literature, the critics had a sense that postwar literature had run its course by the end of the 1960s.

In retrospect, I have come to realize how much my search for continuities was permeated by the discovery of my own belatedness in recognizing the larger historical picture. While I learned to distinguish the signs of belatedness in the efforts of German writers to contribute to a cultural recovery after Nazism, I saw the indications of a *Nachholen*, a catching up, as a general intellectual and artistic phenomenon in post-Nazi, post-war Germany. Tracing the origins of the oppositional spirit of the authors of Group 47, one can discern a desire to make up for a failure. This desire resulted in a belated *résistance*, a *nachgeholt* *Résistance*,⁶ against the reigning powers and their claim on reality. Consciously or unconsciously these writers engaged in closing the chapter in which German writers and intellectuals had failed to stand up to the Nazi regime before 1945. With German unification and the end of the Cold War in 1990, the urge to catch up with earlier omissions has itself run its course. Shaped by a different experience of history in the making, a new generation of writers and scholars is poised to develop different criteria for the understanding of recent German literature and culture .

ENDNOTES

¹. Hans Joachim Schädlich, "Die Stunde Null oder Ist heute gestern?" in Schädlich, *Über Dreck, Politik und Literatur: Aufsätze, Reden, Gespräche, Kurzprosa* (Berlin: Literarisches Colloquium, 1992), p. 20.

². Heinrich Böll, *Frankfurter Vorlesungen* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1966), p. 53.

³. Hans Mayer, *Deutsche Literatur seit Thomas Mann* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1968), p. 52.

⁴. Frank Trommler, "Emigration und Nachkriegsliteratur: Zum Problem der geschichtlichen Kontinuität," in *Exil und Innere Emigration: Third Wisconsin Workshop*, eds. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1972), pp.173-197. - Hans Mayer, once

an exile, later a professor in Leipzig and Hannover, and a member of Group 47, did not hide his surprise at the Wisconsin Workshop in 1971 about the similarities of the literary practices before and after Nazism. It indicated the extent to which even a critical contemporary of both periods had become oblivious to certain continuities since 1930.

⁵. Hans Dieter Schäfer, “Die nichtfaschistische Literatur der ‘jungen Generation’ im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland,” in *Die deutsche Literatur im Dritten Reich: Themen - Traditionen - Wirkungen*, eds. Horst Denkler and Karl Prümm (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1976), pp. 459-503.

⁶. See my article, “Die nachgeholte Résistance: Politik und Gruppenethos im historischen Zusammenhang,” in *Die Gruppe 47 in der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik*, eds. Justus Fischer, Eberhard Lämmert, and Jürgen Schutte (Würzburg: Königshausen, 1991), pp. 9-22. - The volume documents the colloquium in honor of Hans Werner Richter’s eightieth birthday in the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, on November 25-27, 1988.

GERMAN CULTURE AT THE “ZERO HOUR”

Stephen Brockmann

“We do not know what happens at Zero. If anything happens.
Perhaps it is nothing. A sudden silence will grip the world.”

Kristijana Gunnars¹

The year 1945, and particularly the end of the Second World War on May 8 of that year, have come to be known in Germany as a “*Nullpunkt*” or a “*Stunde Null*,” a “Zero Point” or a “Zero Hour.” While the two terms have slightly different denotations and connotations, both imply an absolute break with the past and a radical new beginning. To speak of a Zero Hour is to invoke rich cultural resonances going back to the creation of the world in Judeo-Christian tradition; to the invention of calendars; to the advent of Christ and Christianity’s division of time itself into the old and the new; to the mathematical acceptance of the number zero, with all its problematic philosophical implications; and to the vague but indispensable concept of modernity itself, with its sweeping away of old traditions and customs.

The situation of Germany in 1945, after the defeat of the Third Reich, the destruction of most major German cities, and the forced exodus of over ten million people from Germany’s Eastern provinces certainly seemed to give credence to the idea of a country that in political, military, and moral terms had landed at absolute Zero. In January of 1945 the concentration camp at Auschwitz had been liberated, and by May of 1945, when the German Reich finally surrendered unconditionally to Allied forces, news of the Nazis’ mass exterminations of Jews and other victims in special concentration camps had spread throughout Germany and the world. In a speech broadcast over the radio to Germany on May 8, 1945, the day of German surrender, Germany’s most famous living writer, Thomas Mann, declared that “our shame lies open to the eyes of the world,” and that “everything German, everyone who speaks German, writes German, has lived in Germany, is affected by this shameful revelation.” “Humanity shudders in horror at Germany!” said Thomas Mann.² The elderly Mann, who had become the most powerful representative of a better, more democratic Germany abroad during the years of Hitler’s Third Reich, was not the only intellectual to view Germany’s situation in such stark terms. In view of German crimes against humanity, the Austrian writer Franz Werfel, born in 1890 to a Jewish family but devoted to Catholicism himself,

wrote a speech “To the German People,” which was published a week after Mann’s speech in the same edition of the Munich newspaper *Bayerische Landeszeitung* as news of the Holocaust itself. From his exile in California, Werfel, like Mann, wrote about the problem of German collective guilt, which was to be one of the most controversial topics in postwar German culture:

German people! Do you know what your guilt and complicity have caused in the years of Heil! 1933 to 1945, do you know that it was Germans who killed millions of peaceful, harmless, innocent Europeans with methods that would make the devil himself turn red with shame, do you know the ovens and gas chambers of Maidanek, the foul mountain of rotting murder victims in Buchenwald, Belsen, and hundreds of other hell camps...The crimes of National Socialism and the unspeakable coarsening of German life are the logical results of the insolent and diabolical teachings that rave about the “right of the strong” and assert that right is solely and alone that which benefits the people, that is a few party bureaucrats and bums...³

It was not just exiled intellectuals who took an extreme view of the German situation and German guilt in 1945. Intellectuals at home were also aware of the seriousness of the situation, even if they tended to be less specific about questions of guilt and political responsibility. In his “Speech to German Youth” that same year the novelist Ernst Wiechert, who had remained in Germany from 1933 to 1945 but always distanced himself from the National Socialists, described the situation of his fatherland in appropriately apocalyptic and existentialist terms:

Here we stand in front of the deserted house and see the eternal stars shining above the ruins of the earth and hear the rain fall in torrents on the graves of the dead and on the grave of an era. Lonelier than any people has ever been on this earth. Branded as no other people has ever been branded. And we lean our foreheads on the ruined walls, and our lips whisper the old human question: “What is to be done?”

Wiechert’s somewhat vague answer to this anything but rhetorical question was: “Let us make a new beginning, mark a new borderstone for a new field.”⁴ The man calling for this new beginning had been born two years before Hitler, in 1887, and was fifty-eight years old at the time. He had another five years

left to live. Perhaps it is not surprising, in a situation of deep division and mistrust between the generations in Germany, that two years later, on the occasion of Wiechert's sixtieth birthday, the older writer received a rather nasty answer in the form of "The First and Only Speech of German Youth to Their Poet" from the younger writer Erich Kuby, born in 1910. Speaking for Germany's younger generation against Wiechert and the older generation he represented, Kuby declared:

Maybe...it is our misfortune that we have experiences behind us that make us react against the bloated feelings of this St. John, feelings in which the humility of longed-for martyrdom mixes strangely with the most courtly vanity. We did not choose to live in this era. We have to deal with it as we have found it. We can only do this if we refuse to hang any beautifully colored veils between us and reality, the kind of veil that you like to weave out of morality and feeling.

That a God allowed you to speak about sufferings you never experienced is your own affair. You are neither the first nor the only person who thrives mightily by doing so. But that you dare to speak about our suffering moves us to this disclaimer. Can't you finally keep your promise and leave us out of the game?⁵

Neither Wiechert's nor Kuby's speech sounded very much like a new beginning in Germany. If there was going to be a new beginning in Germany in 1945, it was not clear that either the older generation or the younger generation had a very good idea of what that new beginning might be.

And yet by now, long after the debates between the younger generation and the older generation and between winners and losers that occurred in Germany after the Second World War, it has become a commonplace to speak of 1945 not just as an end but also as a new beginning. Forty-three years after Germany's Zero Hour and about a year before the collapse of the German Democratic Republic and the subsequent events leading to German reunification, philosopher Peter Sloterdijk reflected on the meaning of his own troubled nation and its history in precisely the image of a "*Nullpunkt*." Sloterdijk suggested that postwar Germans felt the necessity to break out of the hermeneutic circle of tradition and begin in a radically new way, rejecting all inexorable lines and heritages. The ability "to begin anew and almost *ex nihilo*" was, for Sloterdijk in 1988, "a necessary element in the profile of an intelligentsia

which, after 1945, wanted to create forms of life worthy of being passed on in a nation full of bombed-out self-destructors.” Sloterdijk spoke of the necessity for autodidacticism and the urge to rid oneself of all tradition, because “since the year 1945 we have nothing but the indescribable behind our backs, and we are tattooed by unconditional horror.”⁶ Such a statement sounded remarkably like the invocations of a Zero Hour by the younger generation forty years earlier.

The Origins of the Term “Zero Hour”

Even though the term “Zero Hour” is by now a commonplace when referring to the Germany of 1945, it was by no means a commonplace in 1945 itself. The historian Jürgen Kocka has written that in 1945 “people tried to survive in the ruins. The horizon got narrower. You weren’t making world history any more..., instead you were standing in line for rations and exchanging coffee for margarine...”⁷ Eyewitness accounts tend to bear Kocka out. As one German gentleman who was only fourteen years old at the time wrote at the beginning of the fiftieth anniversary year 1995, “It wasn’t a Zero Hour for me, all the events, my worries about getting food to eat, the many refugees from the Eastern territories, the bombed-out citizens, the desperate supply situation for energy like coal, electricity, and gas, left me little time to think about what had happened.”⁸ As one prototypical character in a 1947 novel declares to her all too politically concerned husband, “We all want to live, nothing more.”⁹ This fictional character appears to have captured the spirit of her times. The German writer Alfred Andersch described postwar Germans as “like animals looking for food, on the hunt for warm shelter.”¹⁰ Describing Germans’ state of mind after the war, the philosopher Karl Jaspers suggested, “One simply does not want to suffer any more. One wants to escape the misery [and] to live, but does not wish to ponder. The mood is as if one expects to be compensated after the terrible suffering or at least to be comforted; but one does not want to be burdened with guilt.”¹¹ Another German, herself only twelve at the time, reflected when thinking about the year 1945 fifty years later, “For me the Zero Hour meant—I can go back to my parents, we’re alive, there are no more bombs falling.”¹² Another German, eighteen years old in 1945, remarked, “I didn’t have the feeling of a ‘Zero Hour,’ of a new beginning...I was concerned with continuing to get by satisfactorily, helping out and supporting my family.”¹³ Most Germans seem to

have felt the same way. Far from thinking about new beginnings or even placing the end of Hitler's Third Reich or of the German Reich itself into the broader philosophical context implied by a term like "*Nullpunkt*," most Germans seem to have been largely concerned simply with surviving. After all, many millions of Germans were being driven out of the Eastern provinces East Prussia, Silesia, and Eastern Pomerania. Other millions of Germans were still in uniform fighting off the various Allied armies or were in prisoner-of-war camps in Russia, eastern or western Europe, or the United States. Other Germans were digging themselves out of the rubble of what had once been their cities and towns. Many other Germans were long since dead. If one searches through published German documents of the year 1945 one finds no reference whatsoever to any kind of a "*Stunde Null*" or a "*Nullpunkt*." The very concept of a "*Nullpunkt*" appears to have been just as much of an outside imposition on Germany as the defeat of Hitler itself. The most powerful reference to a kind of vacuum or nothingness in Germany in 1945 came from the Allied Armies themselves, which, in May of 1945 declared that the German Reich had ceased to exist. For more than four years thereafter Germany in fact did not exist legally. The first significant postwar reference specifically to a Zero time comes not from a German but from a foreigner: as the title of Italian neorealist film director Roberto Rossellini's 1948 movie *Germania, anno zero* (*Germany, Year Zero*), which deals quite sympathetically with the many problems and ultimate suicide of a young German boy of about thirteen and addresses in a broader sense the difficult question of how it is possible for youth to survive at all in a destroyed civilization in which all certainties and all nurturing from adults have disappeared. Rossellini's film gives evidence not of a younger generation's desire to burn all bridges behind it but rather of adults' betrayal of the younger generation and failure to transmit the cultural tradition.

Others before Rossellini had used the term "Zero Hour," of course, but not with respect to the year 1945. In the English language "zero hour" generally has a military meaning: since World War One, it has been used to indicate the time at which some great military action has to take place, no doubt because many great military actions have in fact begun at or around midnight, the beginning of a new day. With respect to Germany it was the German refugee Erika Mann, Thomas Mann's peripatetic daughter, who, in a 1940 book entitled *Zero Hour*, urged Americans to be aware of and to face the danger

posed to them by Nazi Germany. In an article entitled “Don’t Make the Same Mistakes,” Mann had asked rhetorically,

Am I going too far? Am I a stranger? Am I meddling in other people’s affairs? There is only one affair—the affair of mankind—and that is my affair as well as yours. Into the hands of America, into your hands, God has placed the affairs of mankind. And one man should be forbidden to entreat you: ‘Act! This is your hour, it’s the final hour—the Zero Hour!’¹⁴

In this case the “Zero Hour” concept referred to the necessity for decisive action by Americans to avert a disaster. Three years prior to the publication of Erika Mann’s plea, the journalist Richard Freund, raised in Germany but long since a British citizen, had written a widely noticed and popular analysis, addressed largely to Great Britain as “the greatest Empire of all time,” of the precarious state of world affairs and also given his book the title *Zero Hour*. In that book Freund, less emotional than Mann but nevertheless filled with foreboding, had written quite presciently,

War is near. With every new crisis in international relations the area of disturbance grows wider, distrust sinks deeper, confidence becomes more difficult to restore. The Italo-Abyssinian war, the re-occupation of the Rhineland, the Spanish civil war came near to causing a general conflagration. The next flash may be the signal. It is Zero Hour.

Whereas Erika Mann invoked the importance of America, Freund invoked the importance of Great Britain: “It is Great Britain, and she alone, who can yet prevent a disaster if it can be prevented at all.”¹⁵ In both Mann’s and Freund’s books “Zero Hour” had a clearly military implication; and, moreover, it was intended as a call to action.

The same was true for the German leftist Karl Becker, a former member of the *Reichstag* living as a refugee in England, who, in 1944, published a pamphlet entitled *Zero Hour for Germany* intended both to demonstrate to the outside world the existence of a different, better Germany and to convey to the Germans themselves the necessity for overthrowing Hitler and his regime by their own strength. Becker, too, used the concept of the Zero Hour as a call to arms, this time not to the Allies but to the German people. Impressed with the July 14, 1943, creation in Moscow of the National Committee “Free

Germany,” which called for the German people to overthrow the Hitler regime themselves, Becker approvingly quoted from the manifesto of the Committee itself:

If the German people permit themselves further to be led, without will or resistance, into ruin, then, with each day of the war, they will become, not only weaker and more powerless, but also more guilty. For then Hitler would only be overthrown by the armed force of the Allies.¹⁶

In such an event, according to Becker, Hitler’s military defeat would become the moral defeat of the German nation itself. Citing the words of one of the chief Committee members, Becker suggested:

If the defeat is finally confirmed on German soil, if Hitler is overthrown through the armed power of the United Nations, then the German people will have lost all right to say that the German people is not Hitler.¹⁷

Such sentiments were by no means unique to German communists and other leftists in exile. They were one of the motives for the attempt by conservative German army officers to assassinate Hitler only a week after the foundation of the National Committee, on July 20, 1944, and they had been in evidence inside Germany itself as early as December, 1942, when an underground conference of the German resistance had urged “the overthrow of the Hitler government and the formation of a national democratic peace movement” and insisted that “the longer the war lasts... the heavier will be the weight of responsibility resting upon our people.”¹⁸

Of course the German resistance never did succeed in overthrowing Hitler; and, indeed, the German army made the victorious Allies fight many more months until ultimate victory in May of 1945. The fact that in spite of many calls for resistance Hitler’s regime was never seriously threatened from within Germany meant that the concept of a Zero Hour as a final German rebellion against an unjust regime had failed. What was left of the Zero Hour was the concept of a blank space, an emptiness that would either be filled in or left empty by the Germans themselves. Chief proponent of this idea was the *New York Post* columnist Samuel Grafton, who countered specific plans for the postwar restructuring of Germany by politicians like treasury secretary Henry

Morgenthau and British diplomat Robert Gilbert Vansittart with a more flexible position which, though it would confront the German population with a blank slate where their state and its policies had once been, would leave them free to make positive, democratic changes if they chose to do so. Grafton wanted “to present the Germans with a blank, ...to offer them only the barren nothingness of a permanent armistice, an empty space which they must fill in with their own ideas if they have any.”¹⁹ He declared that he “would give” the Germans “a round, ripe nothing, and bid them to fill it in.”²⁰ Believing that any concrete, specific plan would recreate the anti-Versailles Weimar situation by giving room to German irredentism and revisionism, Grafton wanted to give German militarists nothing at all against which they could agitate. Instead he wanted to “let the war, as a legal concept, go on indefinitely, in the form of an armistice,”²¹ giving the Germans no sovereign state and an indefinitely prolonged state of war and military occupation. At times Grafton’s political language sounded very much like the existentialist literary language that came to dominate postwar writing in Germany after the war:

To leave the Germans thus, naked on the side of the moon, facing reality, facing ultimate responsibility for their own futures; this should be our attitude, our only attitude toward them. For there is no educational process we could devise for them which would be half so rich as to compel them to fill in, for themselves, the empty spaces of the unknown future that gapes before them.²²

In spite of signs of resistance from inside Germany, the idea of a “Zero Hour” as a call to arms against the Hitler regime was not primarily internal to Germany. It appears, on the contrary, to have been a dream of those German émigrés who fled to the United States or to Russia or to Mexico insisting on the existence of what Erika and Klaus Mann, in an anguished book with the same title, called “the other Germany,” a good Germany completely different from Hitler’s Germany. The Mann siblings spoke of Hitler’s “Third Reich” as a “false, evil, hateful Germany” and contrasted that evil Germany with a better, humane, European Germany that “would rise from the ashes like a phoenix” after the evil Germany’s defeat.²³ In Klaus Mann’s *The Volcano* one youthful exile had written: “I know that one day Germany will need people like us again. There will be a great deal for us to do.”²⁴ But after 1945 Germany was not so sure that it needed “people like us.” Germany had failed to live up to

the expectations of exiles who desired a Zero Hour created by the Germans themselves, and what it got, instead, was a Zero Hour of the sort envisioned by Samuel Grafton in which a state of indecision and impermanence was enforced by the Allied armies, leaving any ultimate peace treaty entirely dependent on Germans' ability slowly to transform their nation into a peaceful, democratic political entity.

A German Generation Gap?

In Serbian writer Milorad Pavic's novel *Landscape Painted With Tea*, one character, referring to the situation of the younger generation in Germany after 1945, suggests that, because of the older generation's complete bankruptcy, the younger generation is in a position to dominate and control German culture for many decades to come. In Germany, according to Pavic's character, who is advising a member of the younger generation on where it is best to live, "they'll be looking for younger people, who bear no responsibility for the defeat; the generation of fathers has lost the game there; there it's your generation's move."²⁵ Controversial German historian Ernst Nolte has, likewise, suggested that the memory of Germany's "Third Reich" is being used for moral and political purposes by a younger generation "in the age-old battle with 'their fathers.'"²⁶ The American literary scholar Harold Bloom has sought to describe literary progress itself as a kind of primal Freudian scene in which a younger generation is constantly seeking, metaphorically, to "kill" its fathers and to escape from what Bloom called the "anxiety of influence."²⁷ Of course Bloom knew very well that such an escape was impossible.

On the surface, Pavic's scenario for postwar German culture would seem to have plausibility. If literary generations really do behave like Freud's primal horde, in which brothers band together to kill the father, then the collapse of the Third Reich and the death of Hitler would seem to have posed an unparalleled opportunity for staking a new literary and cultural claim. While we find no specific German references to a "*Nullpunkt*" or a "*Stunde Null*" in 1945, we do find many declarations by members of a younger generation decrying the bankruptcy of the older generation and indeed of the entire German cultural tradition. "Our hatred, the hatred of the younger generation, has the justification of unconditional necessity," declared Alfred Andersch during the Nuremberg Trials in 1946.²⁸ Declarations such as this one have come to be

seen as part of a specifically literary Zero Hour associated with the first generation of Group 47 writers centered around the figure of Hans Werner Richter, born in 1908. Among the most famous of these declarations of the moral bankruptcy of an older generation is Richter's own 1946 juxtaposition of a corrupt but all too voluble older generation with a morally intact but silent younger generation. "Rarely in the history of any country...has such a spiritual gap between two generations opened up as now in Germany," wrote Richter. Admitting that his younger generation was as yet relatively silent, Richter wrote,

Yes, this generation is silent, but it is silent not because it is without a clue, it is silent not because it has nothing to say or can not find the words that are necessary in order to say what has to be said. It is silent because it has the definite feeling that the discrepancy between a human existence that is threatened and the comfortable problems of the older generation that has emerged from its Olympic silence after twelve years is too big to be bridged. It knows that the image of human existence that the older generation inherited from its forefathers and which it would now like to erect again can no longer be built. It knows that this image is permanently destroyed. Perhaps the generation knows this only intuitively, but it knows.

Richter's specific declaration that the silence of the younger generation was **not** a result of having nothing to say or being "clueless" suggested precisely the opposite: that in fact the younger generation was without a spiritual compass and unable to say anything meaningful about the situation in which it found itself. Of course the younger generation was not alone in its inability to understand the current situation. No less a figure than the distinguished historian Friedrich Meinecke had suggested in his 1946 book *The German Catastrophe* that it might never be possible fully to understand what had happened to Germany during the Third Reich, and that "the problems we are faced with today and the catastrophe we have experienced force our feeling to go far beyond all previous disasters of this sort."²⁹ But Richter tried to make a virtue out of what seemed an unpleasant necessity. He painted a picture of profound discontinuity and a break in the cultural tradition that precisely describes the most radical vision of a Zero Point:

Faced with the smoke-blackened picture of this European landscape of ruins, in which human beings wander aimlessly, cut loose from all outdated bonds, the value systems of the past turn pale and lifeless.

Any possibility of connecting up with what went before, any attempt to begin again where the older generation left its continuous developmental path in 1933 in order to surrender to an irrational adventure, seems paradoxical in the face of this European picture.

Richter concluded,

Because of the complete dislocation of life feeling, because of the violence of the experiences which have become a part of and which have shaken the younger generation, this generation believes that the only possible source for a spiritual rebirth lies in an absolute and radical new beginning.³⁰

While Richter's words are noteworthy for the radicality of their intention to break with tradition, it is significant that Richter makes no attempt to describe precisely how such a break can be accomplished, let alone to address the question of whether a begin *ex nihilo* is humanly possible. For all his intention to break with the older generation and with tradition, Richter's vision of a radical new beginning is not substantively different from Ernst Wiechert's noble but vague 1945 address to the German nation. Three years later Alfred Andersch, born in 1914, was to declare:

Because of the dictates of a completely unprecedented situation, the younger generation stands before a tabula rasa, before the necessity of achieving, through an original act of creation, a renewal of German spiritual life.³¹

Like Richter, Andersch suggested that "Especially for the younger generation, the collapse of the old world has...created the feeling that there are absolutely no givens, the nascent feeling of an original new becoming for which there are no patterns or models."³²

Such statements certainly underline the intention of a younger generation to break with its predecessors and the past they represented. Words such as "Zwang" (force) and "Notwendigkeit" (necessity) however, point to the fact that the new beginning is not just a question of volition; rather, the new beginning is felt to be an assignment, a task, a mission. The renewal of German intellectual life and the original act of creation appear more as unpleasant necessities than

as longed-for events. As the young writer Erich Kuby had said in his reply to the older writer Ernst Wiechert, “We did not choose to live in this era. We have to deal with it as we have found it.” The emphasis is on a highly undesirable situation that the younger generation did not choose, and that it is forced to deal with against its will. Wolfdietrich Schnurre underlined this sense of unpleasant duty when he wrote:

We did not write because we had set ourselves the goal of becoming writers. We wrote because we felt that it was our duty to issue a warning. It was not easy for us to write; we were left completely to our own devices. Because there was no ethical support system, there was no literary model, there was no tradition.³³

While it is clear that the older generation will be no help in creating a new German culture, the contours of that new culture remain nebulous.

More than any other writer, perhaps, Heinrich Böll, born in 1917, became for both Germans and non-Germans the primary representative of a younger generation trying to face the problems of the German past and their continuing effects on the present. Böll’s 1950 short story “Stranger, Bear Word to the Spartans We...” (“*Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa*”) illustrates better than anything else the younger generation’s feeling of being cut off and alienated from the past. The story deals with a wounded young soldier’s return to his hometown and former high school, which has been turned into a hospital. Although the soldier does not know it, he has lost both arms and a leg. The entire story relates the young man’s gradual realization that he is now in his home town, in his former high school, in his former classroom, surrounded by once familiar things, including even his own writing on the blackboard. All these once familiar things have become completely strange and foreign to the young man; he has no sense of recognition when he sees them. This is a precise description of what is meant by the Brechtian term “alienation” or “defamiliarization,” in which that which is or once was completely familiar becomes completely strange. Subject to this alienation are not only the school with its classrooms and personnel and the young man himself in his former status as a schoolboy but also the entire classical tradition of German humanistic education passed on in that school and represented by the broken-off words “Stranger, Bear Words to the Spartans We...” as well as by “busts of Caesar, Cicero, and Marcus Aurelius”³⁴ and a whole host of other cultural artifacts

that represent Germany's view of itself as heir to Greek and Roman culture. The young man no longer recognizes all of these things: "Besides, I feel nothing. Apart from my eyes, nothing tells me I'm in my school, in my old school that I left only three months ago. Eight years in the same school is a pretty long time—is it possible that after eight years only your eyes recognize the place?"³⁵ What Hans Werner Richter and other proponents of the Zero Hour had described as a complete and almost heroic renunciation of all cultural tradition becomes for Böll the gradual and painful recognition of a young man's utter helplessness and isolation. Ironically, the break with the cultural tradition begins with the fulfillment of the classical injunction "Know thyself!" For Böll understanding begins with self-recognition: "I lay on the operating table and saw myself quite distinctly, but very small, dwarfed, up there in the clear glass of the light bulb, tiny and white, a narrow, gauze-colored little bundle looking like an unusually diminutive embryo: so that was me up there."³⁶ This very small, shrunken embryo reflected in the light bulb is the embryo of postwar German culture, literally amputated not as an act of heroic will but out of weakness, inability, even guilt.

Pavic's depiction of a younger generation eager and willing to break with its guilty parents does not really fit the West German situation in 1945, although in many ways it began to fit somewhat later. While such important postwar works as Wolfgang Borchert's *Draußen vor der Tür* (The Man Outside), probably the most famous postwar German drama of a returning soldier, accurately represent the hopelessness and the feelings of victimization in the younger generation, the younger generation was not as innocent of the past as it liked to think. Hitler's National Socialist movement had, after all, to a great extent painted itself precisely as a dynamic youth movement rebelling against the conformist, lifeless "systems" of the older generation. People like propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels had grandly declared that "youth is always right in any conflict with old age."³⁷ Hitler had boasted that German youth belonged to him. The National Socialists had created their own youth movement, the Hitler Youth, and virtually all German young people belonged to it. In songs, poems, speeches, novels, movies, plays, and party congresses the Nazis celebrated youth at the expense of old age. The anthem of the Hitler Youth had proclaimed, "Our flag is worth more than death," glorifying even death as martyrdom for Hitler and the fatherland. In the last year of the war one Hitler Youth song began:

Germany, we will not fail
Until our bodies must grow cold
Better that our foreheads pale
So that our country keeps its soul.³⁸

“It would be the task of us young people to structure the world well,” remembered one woman of her mindset as a fervent teenage believer in the Nazi youth movement, suggesting that “My thinking remained short-circuited in a vicious circle of idealism and self-denial.”³⁹ Describing autobiographically the experiences of a sixteen-year-old German girl at the moment of “liberation” from the Nazis, the writer Christa Wolf remembered, “I did not want to be liberated.”⁴⁰ One of the first works of the “new” German literature by a new generation to appear after the war’s end was thirty-eight-year old Walter Kolbenhoff’s 1946 *Von unserem Fleisch und Blut* [From Our Flesh and Blood], which told the story of seventeen-year old Werwolf and fanatical Nazi Hans, deeply resentful of his Social Democratic working class father, who, at the end of the war, fights a bitter rear-guard action against the defeatism of his recalcitrant German elders which leads to the brutal murder of two people. During the period of Nazi rule Hans triumphantly declares to his father, “You have lost; we have won! We will show you!”⁴¹ And even after the war is lost, Hans continues to insist that he is right and the entire opportunistic older generation wrong: “All your laws have no validity for me any more,” declares Hans rebelliously, insisting “I have to separate myself totally from everything.” As Hans’s brother Paul tells him, “You are sick... You are the best proof of how horrible is the plague with which they have infected you.”⁴² Hans’ idea of a *tabula rasa*, rhetorically if not semantically similar to postwar Zero Hour rhetoric, is the quite literal desire that all of Germany should be destroyed completely if it fails to put up a sufficiently heroic fight: “If we go down, then everything must go down too, he thought. They would find nothing left but a desert.”⁴³ And citing the quote his elders have brainwashed him with, he declares, “After us the deluge. And then the desert.”⁴⁴ One German woman who, several decades later, wrote a book about her experiences in the Nazi youth movement declared that even after it was clear that Hitler and the National Socialists had lost the war she wanted, unlike her own father and the older generation he represented, to remain true to what she had believed in: “I wanted to keep the faith with everything that I had said. I belonged to the Führer even

now.”⁴⁵ In and after 1945 there was a “*Störtebecker*” legend of young people in Germany living without adult control as petty thieves and criminals, and in some cases this legend was tinged with elements of resistance heroism. In fact, however, German youth’s motivation in becoming outlaws was less political resistance than economic necessity or a more general resistance to authority. Significantly enough, Rossellini’s *Germania, anno zero* also deals not with the moral superiority but with the moral endangerment of the younger generation: the fourteen-year old hero winds up killing his father not out of any desire for a new spiritual beginning but because his Nazi teacher has filled him with social Darwinist platitudes about the right of the strong against the weak. The best literature of the younger generation after the Second World War preserved precisely this sense of a moral endangerment of the young so far removed from Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s blithe 1980s declarations of a “*Gnade der späten Geburt*” (“grace of late birth”). Such literature documents precisely the potential for identification with criminals and oppressors as well as victims. As Peter Weiss writes with reference to the perpetrators of the National Socialist Holocaust in his autobiographical novel *Fluchtpunkt*, “I could have been on the other side..., if my grandfather in his caftan had not saved me, I would probably have stayed on their side. There were moments in which I regretted the fact that I was no longer allowed to play my part.”⁴⁶ Far from viewing the crimes of the Nazis as incomprehensible, Peter Weiss views them as all too human, claiming “that I was capable of being on the side of the persecutors. I had what it takes to take part in an execution.”⁴⁷ Günter Grass’s *Danziger Trilogie* always focuses on precisely this endangered younger generation, to which Grass himself, born in 1927, belongs. But Grass presents Oskar Matzerath, Joachim Mahlke, and Walter Matern, the main characters in *The Tin Drum*, *Cat and Mouse*, and *Dog Years* not as unblemished moral heroes victimized by their elders but rather as highly ambivalent, problematic figures. It is true, for instance, that Oskar’s actions lead to the death of his opportunistic National Socialist father Matzerath, but they also lead to the death of his reluctant Polish resistance-fighter uncle and putative biological father Jan Bronski. The youthful hero of *Dog Years*, Walter Matern, eagerly joins the SA and does little about the persecution of his Jewish friend Eduard Amsel, while Joachim Mahlke dreams of glory as a German Navy officer and only gets into trouble with the Nazi authorities when he steals an officer’s Iron Cross. In each of these books, the main body of Grass’s literary treatment of

the Nazi period, the major characters share destructive, even sadistic impulses that bring them dangerously close to the National Socialists themselves. What Grass shows is precisely not a younger generation free of guilt and ready to make a new start but rather a younger generation incapable of growth. Oskar Matzerath literally does not grow from his third birthday onward; at the end of the war he falls into his own father's grave and starts growing again, but he remains somehow grotesque and twisted; while Mahlke disappears at the end of *Cat and Mouse* and is presumed to have committed suicide. And Walter Matern survives into the postwar period, but not as a paragon of moral virtue.

The Failure of the “Zero Hour”

To speak of Günter Grass' work in the context of the postwar period is to move beyond the year 1945 by fifteen years to the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s and, hence, to imply a failure of the supposed new beginning in 1945. If writers like Richter had declared the need for a new beginning after the war, they had also done so under the banner of both reluctance and silence, as Richter himself had admitted with his rhetorical question of 1946: “Why is the younger generation silent?” The documents that we have portray a younger generation that is incapable of sustained speech: Rossellini's youth commits patricide and suicide, Kolbenhoff's youth commits murder, Borchert's youth dies a lonely and miserable death outside on the doorstep.

Where was the new beginning to come from? Literally from nothing, from a *tabula rasa*? How is it possible to create something from nothing? If, as Borchert suggested in *The Man Outside*, God was an old man in whom no one believed any more; or if God was, as Wolfdietrich Schnurre wrote in his 1946 short story “The Burial,” dead—“LOVED BY NO ONE, HATED BY NO ONE, HE DIED TODAY AFTER LONG SUFFERING, BORN WITH DIVINE PATIENCE: GOD”⁴⁸—then where was any new morality to come from? Could it be expected from a youth totally indoctrinated by the Third Reich? Although the 1945 Zero Hour was characterized by declarations of the need for a new language, with Viktor Klemperer's *LTI* as a study of the Nazis' penetration of language itself, any linguist knows that it is impossible to create a new human language because human language relies precisely on convention. Human languages change, but they cannot be created out of

whole cloth. Even declarations of the inadequacy of the human language to convey authentic human feeling have a long history in modernism and are by no means new. In a 1966 study showing the failure of the postwar attempts to create a new language, Urs Widmer wrote: “Twelve years of cliché language seem to be a heavy burden on the young journalists. They are unable to free themselves from the nebulous ideas that the Third Reich had created. They continue to write in the same diffuse style—it’s only the pluses and minuses that have changed.”⁴⁹

From the very beginning, then, the 1945 Zero Hour stands under the sign of both necessity and failure—of a possibility that might have been and should have been but was not taken advantage of: something that ought to have happened but did not. The Zero Hour is present as a felt absence, as something that did not occur. When, in 1967 the literary critic Hans Mayer declared brusquely, “The idea of a Zero Hour turned into nothing,”⁵⁰ or when literary scholar Heinrich Vormweg asserted four years later, “There was no ‘Zero Hour,’”⁵¹ or when film director Rainer Werner Fassbinder declared sadly in 1978, “Our fathers had the chance to found a state that could have been the most humane and freest ever,”⁵² they were expressing a sense of lost opportunity that had already been expressed in 1947, one year before the West German currency reform, by the journalist Eugen Kogon, author of the first major book on the Nazi concentration camps immediately after the war, when he wrote: “The old ways continue, they have not been eliminated; through mistakes, failures, weakness, and all sorts of stupidity on all sides, they are poisoning existence and crippling our thought, our actions, they besmirch our feelings, they overshadow all hope.”⁵³ One year after Kogon wrote these words an opinion poll gave drastic confirmation of Kogon’s evaluation by suggesting that fifty-seven percent of Germans living in the Western occupation zones believed that National Socialism was “a good idea that was only carried out wrong.”⁵⁴ Kogon was one of the first German critics to suggest that what was happening in West Germany was more a “restoration” than a “renewal.” Five years later Kogon wrote that “Restoration . . . exactly reflects our social condition,” suggesting that the West German restoration implied a politics “of traditional ‘values,’ means and forms of thought, of seeming certainties, of the recreation of well known interests as much as possible, a politics of lack of imagination.”⁵⁵ Summing up the restoration almost two decades later, Kogon used words strikingly similar to those literary critics were later to adopt in

attacking the concept of the Zero Hour: “The year 1945 was not the Year Zero. Even back then there was, all appearances to the contrary, no such thing as a *tabula rasa*.”⁵⁶ Similar feelings had been expressed by many others, including the journalist Walter Dirks, who, in 1950, was already writing about what he called “the restorative character of the epoch” (“*der restaurative Charakter der Epoche*”), suggesting that “The recreation of the old world has occurred with such force that all we can do right now is accept it as a fact of life.”⁵⁷ Such sentiments even shone through in the cultural and literary criticism of champions of the Zero Hour like Hans Werner Richter, Gustav René Hocke, and Alfred Andersch when they argued against what Hocke called German “calligraphy,” the continuing power of an apolitical German cultural tradition even in the face of the disaster of 1945; or in the opposition of Group 47 writers to the immanent division of Europe and Germany itself into two opposing blocs. As the critic Herbert Ihering wrote about the cultural situation in 1947, “The surface can be moved, but at the deeper levels of spirit and feeling we run up against a hardening, almost an ossification.”⁵⁸ As early as 1950, only one year after the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany in the West and the German Democratic Republic in the East, Alfred Kantorowicz proclaimed, “Our dream of the regeneration of Germany is at an end,” asserting, in what would be a continuing refrain in the coming years, that, “thinkers and poets, every sort of intellectually creative person, are all out in the cold.”⁵⁹

In spite of its dubiousness as an interpretation of historical fact, however, the concept of the Zero Hour was to prove extremely useful to postwar Germans who wanted to assert a radical break with the Nazi past. The Zero Hour was a kind of *cordon sanitaire* erected against an uncomfortable past. In its most radical form the Zero Hour implied that German history had begun in 1945 and therefore potentially absolved Germans of guilt for anything that had happened earlier. Since the late 1960s, the concept of the Zero Hour has come under attack for precisely this reason. In particular leftist scholars seeking to root out remnants of the authoritarian past in contemporary Germany found it useful to concentrate not on historical disruption but on continuity. In the cultural sphere the fact of political and cultural restoration after the war and the continuity of literary existentialism throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s has justifiably led critics like Frank Trommler and Hans Dieter Schäfer to speak of the entire thirty-year period from 1930 to 1960 as one of apolitical existentialism.⁶⁰ In such a scheme the year 1945 appears not as a Zero Hour

but rather as the chronological middle of a literary period that predated the Nazis' rise to power and lasted for another decade and a half after their total defeat. Other critics, trying to save the concept of a Zero Hour, have spoken of the postwar period as a kind of political, moral, literary, and cultural vacuum in which elements from the past survived not as a result of some internal literary dynamic but as a result of blind, automatic continuation in the face of spiritual crisis, in much the same way that a dead animal can sometimes continue certain movements or growth even long after the hour of its death.⁶¹ The dispute between the two groups of critics revolves less around the facts of the German political and literary situation themselves than around the interpretation of the relative independence of literary and aesthetic phenomena from political phenomena.

Literature, Politics, and the Zero Hour

If the year 1945 was indeed not a Zero Hour, however, then there are a number of problems to solve. First and foremost is the obvious fact that the postwar Federal Republic of Germany has become a relatively vibrant and successful democracy, the most successful democracy that Germany has ever produced. If 1945 was not a break, then at what point did the break come? At what point did the National Socialist Germany become the democratic Germany that Germans and others know today?

Certainly literature played a role in helping to create that Germany. In the wake of the Second World War, and in spite of the continuing predominance of the anti-political German literary tradition, many representatives of the younger generation sought a thoroughgoing politicization of literature that would break the old and very German separation between *Geist* (spirit) and *Macht* (power). Theo Pirker argued that,

The modern poet sees his task precisely in the portrayal of social reality, in making visible the real fate that is so hard to grasp because of constant motion, i.e. the political fate of society,

and that the writer's goals "are political, not aesthetic, they are collective and not individual, they are related to content, not to form." The writer, argued Pirker, was "the epitome of the self-conscious human being in a society that is

only beginning to become conscious of itself.”⁶² Similarly Erich von Kahler suggested,

Yes, the spiritual human being will become militant, he will even have to join together with others like himself if he wants to make his voice heard, he will have to become more and more “political.”⁶³

The belief that literature should become political also led Gustav René Hocke and Alfred Andersch to argue against what they called “German calligraphy” in the pages of their journal *Der Ruf*. Heinrich Böll had also argued against the aesthetic solipsism of a literature unconcerned with human reality in his first major postwar essay, the 1952 “In Praise of Ruin Literature” (“*Bekanntnis zur Trümmerliteratur*”), in which he called such aesthetic solipsism the work of the “blind man’s-buff writer” (“*Blindekuh-Schriftsteller*”) who, instead of reflecting human reality in his work, tries to create with his work a new reality. “The blind man’s-buff writer sees into himself, he builds a world to suit himself,” Böll wrote, arguing that the most egregious example of such writing was Adolf Hitler with his book *Mein Kampf*.⁶⁴ In suggesting this, Böll was clearly connecting pure aestheticism in its German incarnation with National Socialism. At the time this viewpoint was a minority position. But by the time of his death in 1985, Böll had become a cherished German national figure, and his views on literature and moral responsibility were highly influential, probably even predominant. It seems safe to say that the year 1945 marks not so much the end of the “unpolitical” tradition, which still very much continues, as the opening of a significant breach against an apolitical cultural ideology that had largely dominated German cultural life for at least a century. If 1933 had in Alfred Döblin’s scenario seen the creation of two German literatures geographically separated, then 1945 marked the tentative and gradual creation of two German literatures and two German cultures in one country: a strand of literary and cultural creation which, from the early work of Group 47 and of literary émigrés onward gradually worked toward an overcoming of the separation between *Geist* and *Macht* and sought to intervene both artistically and actively in the political realm; and a strand which, from Gottfried Benn and Martin Heidegger in the 1950s to Peter Handke in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s chose quite explicitly and sometimes even combatively to remain

“above” politics. As Peter Handke declared rebelliously after his confrontation with the highly politicized Group 47 writers during their 1966 meeting in Princeton, New Jersey, “I Oam an inhabitant of the Ivory Tower.”⁶⁵ To be sure, the beginning in 1945 was hesitant and almost invisible, indeed almost completely dominated by the continuation of the much older tradition of apolitical glorification of pure art and pure spirit. As late as 1967 Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich could claim that

The chasm between literature and politics in our country has remained. Not one of our writers has yet succeeded in influencing political consciousness or social culture in our Federal Republic. The number of those achieving an active coming to terms with our past is small, rather isolated, and without influence on the course of events.⁶⁶

But only two years after the Mitscherlichs wrote these words two decades of uninterrupted Christian Democratic rule came to an end in Germany and a Social Democratic Party championed by the younger generation of writers assumed preeminent government authority. While the previous two decades now appeared as decades of cultural stagnation, it was during this time that the seeds for the revolt of the 1960s had been planted. Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s the Zero Hour of 1945 is precisely an absence, but it is an absence which, over a long period of dormancy, is gradually filled, until by the 1960s literature becomes fully politicized in Germany and German writers begin to intervene in election campaigns and political debates, as well as to work on issues connected with the National Socialist past. It is precisely as a result of this coming to terms with the past that the greatest works of postwar German literature are written: Paul Celan’s poetry, appearing from the late 1940s on but only getting broad attention after the 1960s; Günter Grass’s *Die Blechtrommel*, Peter Weiss’ *Ästhetik des Widerstands*, Uwe Johnson’s *Jahrestage*, and even Thomas Bernhard’s work. The greatest postwar West German epic literature comes not between 1945 and 1955 but rather long after the Zero Hour; however all of this literature concerns itself with the year 1945, all of it deals with the events of the Third Reich, all of it is, as Peter Sloterdijk puts it, “tattooed by unconditional horror.” In this sense 1945 certainly is a spiritual caesura or a “*Nullpunkt*.” It is the final ground to which postwar German culture always returns, the primal scene. In this sense the year 1945 is less a specific year characterized more or less by continuity than

a continuing discontinuity in German history, precisely the catastrophe toward which Benjamin's Angel of History stares uninterruptedly.⁶⁷ The very title of Uwe Johnson's magnum opus, *Jahrestage* (Anniversaries), implies that German intellectual and spiritual life has become a continuous series of anniversaries, in which the daily political and personal events of the present are always inevitably caught in the vortex of the German past. Johnson wrote his vast work of memory primarily in the late 1960s and 1970s, long before the series of German fiftieth and fortieth anniversaries from January 30, 1983, through Bitburg in May of 1985, Bonn and the German *Bundestag* in November of 1988 to Auschwitz in January of 1995, Dresden in February of 1995, Amsterdam in March of 1995, and Berlin in April and May of 1995 proved his literary construction to be a true reflection of German political reality. In Johnson's novel it is the dead who speak, overshadowing the words of the living: **"If I had known how easy it is for the dead to speak. The dead should keep their mouths shut."**⁶⁸ But the dead do not remain silent. As the German scholar Jochen Vogt has written,

From the beginning up through the 1980s, postwar German-language literature, especially West German literature, has made National Socialism in all its dimensions, from the World War and the Holocaust to every-day, familiar fascism as well as the after-life of fascism in the West German restoration, its most important theme.⁶⁹

If much of political and literary culture in 1945 and afterward behaved as if nothing had happened, it was indeed a younger generation that ultimately triumphed both politically and culturally in the 1960s, and since then German political and literary culture has been a continuous coming to terms with discontinuity, a continuous process of mourning. In 1948 Alfred Andersch had already correctly predicted that in spite of the temporary predominance of "calligraphy" it was to political and moral literature that the future would belong:

If this young literature succeeds in giving itself a convincing form, the future will belong to it, in spite of the broad stream of calligraphy which still dominates the foreground.⁷⁰

In the long run, Andersch was right in his prediction. The attempt to work through the problem of Germany's National Socialist past was to become the major task of postwar German culture, from literature to art and film. Against the background of a widespread cultural struggle to understand the German past, the very critiques of the failure of a *Stunde Null*, of the failure of mourning, are themselves part of the creation of the *Stunde Null* and the creation of mourning. It is not so much the older generation as the younger generation that carries out this mourning: the real grace of late birth is that a younger generation does ultimately begin to carry out the work of mourning that the older generation had refused and denied.

In one of his first postwar short stories, the 1947 anecdote "*Die Botschaft*" (The Message), Heinrich Böll had put into the mouth of his narrator words that were to prove prescient for postwar German cultural history: "I knew then that the war would never come to an end as long as, anywhere, even a single wound that it had caused continued to bleed."⁷¹ It was not only in the technical and legal sense that the Second World War did not end in 1945. It did not end morally, spiritually, and emotionally for German culture either. Much of postwar German culture became an attempt to understand and to treat the open, bleeding wounds that the war had caused. "The war" here is not simply the military conflict that lasted from 1939 to 1945; it is the enormity of Germany's moral, spiritual, political, military, cultural, and economic catastrophe. And the "wounds" caused by the war are not just physical or medical; they are also spiritual, political, national. Germany itself becomes a gaping wound, with the political division between the two postwar German states as only the most obvious and best known incarnation of that wound. After listening to Hitler's New Year's address in 1945 the writer Erich Kästner had written, "The Third Reich is committing suicide. But the corpse is called Germany."⁷² In 1960 Hans Magnus Enzensberger refers to Germany as "a bomb made of flesh,/ a wet, absent wound."⁷³ And by the 1980s Martin Walser is able to see caring for wounds as part of Germany's national mission, since Germany is itself in his view precisely a wound: "We must keep open the wound called Germany."⁷⁴ The paradox is that Nazi crimes rarely present in broad public discourse during the immediate postwar period have become ever more present, ever more visible, and ever more broadly addressed with the passage of time, to the point where it would be no exaggeration to say that reflection on the Nazi past has become **the** primary intellectual and spiritual

contribution of the Federal Republic of Germany to world culture, indeed a source of its very identity. Jürgen Habermas has gone so far as to suggest that Germany's postwar identity is based on an attempt to understand Auschwitz: "Unfortunately, in the cultural nation of the Germans, a connection to universalistic constitutional principles that was anchored in convictions could be formed only after—and through—Auschwitz."⁷⁵ Günter Grass strengthens this conception of Auschwitz as a contributing factor in German identity when he writes:

Nothing, no national emotion, no matter how idyllically tinted, not even any protestations of the amiability of those born too late, can relativize or easily do away with this experience, which we as the guilty have had with ourselves, and which the victims have had with us as unified Germans. We will not get around Auschwitz. We should not even attempt such an act of violence, no matter how much we might wish to do so, because Auschwitz belongs to us, it is a permanent scar on our history, and it has, on the positive side, made possible an insight which might run like this: now, finally, we know ourselves.⁷⁶

While Grass is unusual in the rigor with which he posits Auschwitz as Germany's true Zero Point, he is by no means alone in his vision of the past as a pedagogical tool for use in the present. Moreover, Grass's views are shared not only by writers and intellectuals but also by ordinary German citizens. One German, an architect from Dresden, writes that while the year 1945 itself meant very little to him politically or morally, his later reflection on that year became important politically and morally: "Much later, when I left the then GDR in 1955, I began to understand that May 1945 had been a Zero Hour; the political education that I had achieved by then gave me a basis for analyzing and judging the events that happened from my sixth year of life onward."⁷⁷ Another German, a teacher, writes that while the year 1945 represented for him more a continuity than a discontinuity, "During a visit to the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam I experienced a very powerful feeling of guilt in the form of a collective guilt. I was ashamed of being a German, of speaking German in that place. Without thinking a great deal about it and without a clear directive from outside it was clear to me that as a teacher from 1950 onward I would educate my schoolboys and schoolgirls toward democracy."⁷⁸ In all such confessions one encounters both regret at the absence of change in 1945 itself and a determination to do

better in the future. As German film historian Anton Kaes has written, “the further the past recedes, the closer it becomes.”⁷⁹

Continuing Zero Hour?

This point was quite clearly recognized by the historian Ernst Nolte in his contribution to the 1986 *Historikerstreit* or Historians’ Debate. Quite aside from any of the other controversial political and historical claims in that debate, Nolte’s primary concern was the uncanny presence of the past, which he referred to in the very title of his major article as “the past that does not want to pass away.” Nolte posited a normal process of historical sedimentation and increasing abstraction which allowed for a relatively unemotional scientific accounting for and explanation of past events. As the past passes beyond the life horizons of current generations into the realm of forgetting, it ceases to have existential political or personal meaning and comes instead into the realm of impartial, disinterested science. The implication was that forgetting is just as important as memory, and that in West Germany the natural process of forgetting had somehow, unnaturally, been impeded. Instead of passing into an oblivion that would allow for impartial scientific inquiry, Nolte argued, Germany’s National Socialist past was ever more **present**, ever more part of political debate and public dialogue:

The National Socialist past is...evidently not subject to this attrition, to this weakening; on the contrary, it seems to be getting stronger and more alive all the time..., as a past which has in fact established itself as a present, and which hangs above the present like a sword of judgment.⁸⁰

With reference to a hermeneutics of the Zero Hour, Nolte’s argument implied that the development of the Federal Republic meant less a radical break with the past than an increasingly radical confrontation with the past: the Zero Hour not as the refusal of any connection to the past but rather as the implied horizon of a postwar West German public sphere. Far from disappearing, this horizon became ever more apparent with the passage of time, as if the process of postwar German history were the reverse of a supposedly normal process, a moving backward to the Zero Hour or the Zero Point.

Significantly, both Ernst Nolte and his primary opponent in the Historians' Debate, Jürgen Habermas, were in agreement on the presence of the past. Their disagreement centered not on Nolte's contention that the German past formed a constitutive presence in the contemporary Federal Republic, indeed a fundamental part of West German identity itself. Both Nolte and Habermas were in agreement that the National Socialist past formed a kind of historical horizon; their disagreement centered primarily on the evaluation of this presence as positive or negative. For Nolte the presence of the past was negative because the focus on German crimes against humanity prevented the formation of a healthy and "normal" national pride. No other nation in the world focused so exclusively on self-criticism; indeed the very concept of a strong and healthy national identity required a positive, not a negative identification with the national past. As Nolte's ally in the Historians' Debate, Chancellor Kohl's advisor historian Michael Stürmer argued, "In a land without history the future is won by those who are able to harness memory, coin concepts and interpret the past."⁸¹ Relating Germany's strategic importance to its historical memory, Stürmer insisted, "We cannot stand up in the middle of central Europe and be the strong man in NATO—and do it on our knees."⁸² For Jürgen Habermas, however, the insistence on a dialogue with a past, however horrible that past may have been, gave hope for what he called a postconventional German identity based no longer on uncritical acceptance of the past but precisely on radical, uncompromising questioning. Habermas suggested that critical historians "proceed on the assumption that the work of detached understanding liberates the power of reflective remembrance and thus extends the possibilities for dealing autonomously with an ambivalent tradition."⁸³ Whereas opinion pollsters throughout the 1980s bemoaned German youth's failure to identify positively with their own national traditions, Habermas saw in such lack of positive identification a sign of hope for a genuinely new, non- or even antinationalist Germany.

The debate between Ernst Nolte as a proponent of traditional German national identity and Jürgen Habermas as a proponent of a postconventional, perhaps even postnational German identity was the major intellectual event of the 1980s, summarizing a whole series of debates involving German identity and coming to terms with the past. Hence the debate had a resonance far beyond the purely historical or the purely scientific, because it involved two fundamentally different ways of looking at German identity. This debate was

reopened in a slightly different form in 1989 and 1990 with the unexpected collapse of the German Democratic Republic and, directly related to that collapse, of the entire postwar order in Central and Eastern Europe. Just as most of the debates of the 1980s had focused in one form or another on the question of German normality, and specifically on the comparability of Germany and its history with other western nations and their histories, so too all of the major debates of the 1990s have remained focused on the question of German normality. The collapse of the German Democratic Republic and the subsequent reunification of Germany once again posed the question of German normality in concrete political form. As a nation that was now finally also a unified state, Germany seemed closer to normality than it had ever been in the postwar period, and Chancellor Kohl stressed this desired normality at the moment of economic and currency union in the middle of 1990. Asked what his major hope for the united nation was, he replied, “That things will normalize. That’s the most important thing for us, that we become a wholly normal country, not ‘singularized’ in any question...that we simply don’t stick out. That’s the important thing.”⁸⁴

What the debates since unification suggest is that by the time of German unification in 1990 socially critical West German authors had ceased to be seen as marginal, impotent figures, as what Franz Josef Strauss had once memorably referred to as “rats and blow flies” (“*Ratten und Schmeißfliegen*”), and had instead come to be seen as the very creators of a critical and aware Federal Republican identity. The critic Frank Schirrmacher made this explicit when he called literature itself a “production center of West German consciousness.”⁸⁵ A correlate of this insight is that to oppose the writers and their critical consciousness meant to oppose the Federal Republic itself. The recognition of this fact meant that from 1990 on German conservatives increasingly criticized not only Grass and Habermas and Christa Wolf (now herself also part of Federal Republican identity) but also Konrad Adenauer and the entire process of West German integration with the West, as if in some way Adenauer and Hans Werner Richter had been much closer to each other than either of them had ever imagined at the time. Likewise the critical writers themselves, accustomed to seeing themselves as marginal and impotent, now began to realize their own stake in postwar German identity, including the political and social accomplishments of the Federal Republic. Already in the midst of the Historians’ Debate Habermas had declared point blank that the

greatest political accomplishment of the Federal Republic was the unconditional acceptance of and identification with the democratic West: “That the Federal Republic opened itself without reservation to the political culture of the West is the great intellectual accomplishment of the postwar period, an accomplishment of which precisely my generation can be proud.”⁸⁶ Paradoxically, this very liberating opening was made possible by German military defeat, so that the uneasy tension between defeat and liberation in 1945 has become a continuing refrain in discussions of the German past.⁸⁷ In one of his earlier theoretical works Habermas had modified J. L. Austin’s distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts, i.e. between statements of fact and performative utterances, by suggesting that all speech acts contain an illocutionary or performative element. Throughout his long career as Germany’s leading philosophical intellectual, Habermas has continued to insist on the importance of communication as action or performance. For Habermas, a democracy is constituted not so much by an inherited tradition or a set of rules and regulations as by an act of dialogue among human beings and between human beings and the historical conditions in which they find themselves. What Habermas refers to as “constitutional patriotism” is not the passive acceptance of an inherited set of laws but rather an active process of questioning and debate. A constitution is not a one-time event fixed in stone but rather a constant process of reconstitution: in this sense every genuine constitution is, like Germany’s pre-unification Basic Law, provisional.

Habermas’ reflections on communicative action and constitution are also a reflection on the Federal Republic and its history. Fifty years after the end of the Second World War the Federal Republic is arguably one of the most open democratic societies in the world, and in spite or even because of Habermas’ and others’ initial fears there are signs that national reunification has done nothing substantive to change that fact. In spite of continuing tension between the east and the west, the increasing globalization of capital, and serious anti-foreigner sentiment in Germany since reunification, the Federal Republic was and has remained an open democratic society. Perhaps the major constitutive factor in that openness has been a critical openness toward German national history, toward the horizon of the Zero Hour. The very strength of the reactions against Habermas and Grass is a testament to their discursive power. Germany remains an abnormal society, what the poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger had called “*ein anderes Land als andere Länder*” (“a country different from

different countries”),⁸⁸ in that more than any other nation on earth its identity is based on an act of self-criticism, even self-negation. Germans, in Enzensberger’s view, are people “*die in dieses Land geraten sind/ auf der Flucht vor diesem Land*” (“who have wound up in this country/ in flight from this country”).⁸⁹ Federal Republican identity is based less on Franz Josef Strauss’ “We are somebody again!” (“*Wir sind wieder wer!*”), than on the Buchenwald oath “Never again fascism! Never again war!” (“*Nie wieder Faschismus! Nie wieder Krieg!*”). Such a postconventional identity implies not German self-righteousness but rather precisely German self-questioning. As such, it provides a ray of hope in the continuing storm of history.

ENDNOTES

. Kristjana Gunnars, *Zero Hour* (Red Deer: Red Deer College Press, 1991), p. 33.

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5. Alexander Parlach (Erich Kuby), “Die erste und einzige Rede deutscher Jugend an ihren Dichter,” *Der Ruf* v. 2, no. 25, p. 10; cited in *Auf der Suche nach der Stunde Null*, pp. 18-19.

6. Peter Sloterdijk, *Zur Welt kommen—Zur Sprache kommen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), pp. 47, 48.

7. Jürgen Kocka, “Zerstörung und Befreiung: Das Jahr 1945 als Wendepunkt deutscher Geschichte,” in *Geschichte und Aufklärung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1989), pp. 120-139; here p. 127.

8. Letter from Gerd Rädels, January 1, 1995.

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- ¹⁰. Alfred Andersch, *Deutsche Literatur in der Entscheidung: Ein Beitrag zur Analyse der literarischen Situation* (Karlsruhe: Volk und Zeit, n.d. [1948]), p. 5.
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- ¹². Letter from Erika Keiper, November 29, 1994.
- ¹³. Letter from Helmut Burmeister, December 20, 1994.
- ¹⁴. Stephen Vincent Benét, Erika Mann, et. al., *Zero Hour: A Summons to the Free* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1940), p. 76.
- ¹⁵. Richard Freund, *Zero Hour: Policies of the Powers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), pp. 1 and 251.
- ¹⁶. Karl Becker, *Zero Hour for Germany* (London: I.N.G. Publications, 1944), p. 72. "I.N.G." stands for "Inside Nazi Germany."
- ¹⁷. Becker, p. 72.
- ¹⁸. *The Signs of Awakening: German Underground Speaks: The Peace Manifesto of the Rhineland Conference* (New York: German American, 1943), pp. 25, 19.
- ¹⁹. Samuel Grafton, *Let Germany Earn the Peace* (New York: New York Post, 1945), p. 11.
- ²⁰. Grafton, p. 23.
- ²¹. Grafton, p. 5.
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- ²³. Erika and Klaus Mann, *The Other Germany* (New York: Modern Age, 1940), p. xi.
- ²⁴. Klaus Mann, *Der Vulkan: Roman unter Emigranten* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1939), p. 718.
- ²⁵. Milorad Pavic, *Landscape Painted with Tea* (New York: Knopf, 1990), p. 41.
- ²⁶. Ernst Nolte, "Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will: Eine Rede, die geschrieben, aber nicht gehalten werden konnte," in "*Historikerstreit: Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung*" (Munich: Piper, 1987), pp. 39-47; here, p. 41.

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⁴⁴. Ibid., p. 60.

⁴⁵. Finckh, p. 183.

⁴⁶. Peter Weiss, *Fluchtpunkt* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969, pp. 10-11. Cited in Jochen Vogt, "Erinnerung ist unsere Aufgabe:" *Über Literatur, Moral und Politik 1945-1990* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1991), p. 19.

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⁴⁸. Wolfdietrich Schnurre, "Das Begräbnis," *Erzählungen* (Freiburg: Walter, 1966), pp. 11-18; here p. 11.

⁴⁸. Urs Widmer, *1945 oder die 'Neue Sprache'* (Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1966), p. 198.

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- ⁶⁵. Peter Handke, *Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972).
- ⁶⁶. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens* (Munich: Piper, 1967), p. 57.
- ⁶⁷. Walter Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” in *Allegorien kultureller Erfahrung: Ausgewählte Schriften 1920-1940* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1984), p. 160.
- ⁶⁸. Uwe Johnson, *Jahrestage*, v. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 45.
- ⁶⁹. Jochen Vogt, “*Erinnerung ist unsere Aufgabe: Über Literatur, Moral und Politik 1945-1990* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1991) p. 12.
- ⁷⁰. Andersch, *Deutsche Literatur in der Entscheidung*, p. 25.

⁷¹. Heinrich Böll, "Die Botschaft," in *Werke: Romane und Erzählungen I: 1947-1952* (Cologne: Lamuv, 1987), pp. 30-35; here, p. 33.

⁷². Hermann Glaser, "'Wir schauten stumm auf unsere Befreier,'" *Die Zeit* (overseas edition), May 5, 1995, p. 6.

⁷³. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Gedichte 1955-1970* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), p. 27. Originally published in 1960.

⁷⁴. For a more thorough discussion of this image, see my "'The Wound Called Germany,'" *The Midwest Quarterly*, v. 35, no. 2 (Winter 1994), pp. 198-215.

⁷⁵. Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, ed. and trans. Shierry Weber Nichol森 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), p. 227.

⁷⁶. Günter Grass, *Schreiben nach Auschwitz* (Frankfurt: Luchterhand, 1990), p. 42. Grass's reference to those literally "born afterwards" ("nachgeboren") is of course a critique of Chancellor Kohl's "grace of late birth." For an alternative English translation, see Grass, *Two States—One Nation?*, trans. Krishna Winston with A.S. Wensinger (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), p. 123.

⁷⁷. Gerd Rädcl (see note 8).

⁷⁸. Helmut Burmeister (see note 13).

⁷⁹. Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat*, p. ix.

⁸⁰. Nolte (note 26), p. 39.

⁸¹. Michael Stürmer, "Geschichte in geschichtslosem Land," *ibid.*, p. 36.

⁸². James Markham, "The Uneasy West Germans: Yearnings Despite Prosperity," *The New York Times*, August 2, 1987, p. 14.

⁸³. Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism*, p. 225.

⁸⁴. Serge Schmemann, "Kohl, the Man for the German Moment," *The New York Times*, July 1, 1990, pp. 1, 4.

⁸⁵. Frank Schirrmacher, "Abschied von der Literatur der Bundesrepublik," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 October 1990: L 1-2. I have discussed Schirrmacher's position more thoroughly, connecting the first post-unification *Literaturstreit* with the 1986

Historikerstreit in "The Politics of German Literature," *Monatshefte*, v. 84, no. 1 (Spring 1992), pp. 46-58.

⁸⁶. Habermas, *The New Conservatism*, p. 227.

⁸⁷. Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker's 1985 speech in commemoration of May 8 revolved around precisely this tension. See "Der 8. Mai 1945—40 Jahre danach," in von Weizsäcker, *Von Deutschland aus* (Berlin: Corso bei Siedler, 1985), pp. 13-35. The tension was still present in the controversial manifesto published by German conservative intellectuals a decade later, shortly before the fiftieth anniversary of the war's end: "8. Mai 1945—Gegen das Vergessen," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 7, 1995, p. 3, which began with the apt words of the first Federal President, Theodor Heuss: "In essence the eighth of May 1945 remains the most tragic and most questionable paradox for all of us. Why? Because we were rescued and destroyed at one and the same time."

⁸⁸. Enzensberger (see note 73), p. 25.

⁸⁹. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

FROM ZERO HOUR TO HIGH NOON: THE FUNCTIONS OF POSTWAR GERMAN LITERATURE

Thomas W. Kniesche

Prelude

1945: “Zero Hour.” The notion implies an apocalyptic ending and therefore a new beginning, utter devastation and deprivation, but also new hope and the option of embarking on a voyage to formerly unknown territories. Within the context of German history, it is supposed to be a belated trip toward modernity—American or western style—, since only after the defeat of National Socialism could the anti-modernism of the 1920s, whose prehistory could be traced back to the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and Romanticism, be left behind. Only after the ultimate decision had been made could a new epoch begin.

1945 was called “Zero Hour.” In similar fashion, 1989 might have been regarded as “High Noon.” On the streets of East Germany, the last remnants of communism, of Ronald Reagan’s “Evil Empire,” prepared for battle. When the demonstrators in Leipzig were faced with the combined powers of the party and the state, there was also a moment of decision. This time, however, a community was able to cast aside the yoke of oppression by summoning strength and courage from within. And yet, there is an uncanny parallel: Just as in Fred Zinnemann’s movie, another part—the majority, in fact—of the same community stood aside and watched from the distance, in this case from the safe distance of the other side of the Wall.

Zero Hour, High Noon: Both concepts are phantasmic or mythical constructions that take on their full meaning only within the realm of a community or a society in which they are pressed into service to safeguard, to preserve, to overcome, to rebuild, to repress, to disavow, or to deny. Although the focus of this paper will be “Zero Hour,” we should not forget the phantasmic or mythical dimension of both “Zero Hour” and “High Noon.” For only the interdependence of the mythical and the historical, of the phantasmic and the sociopolitical dimensions—an interplay that can be called ‘ideology’—will ultimately yield an appropriate understanding of the phantasm/fantasy of “Zero Hour.” It is the premise of the following remarks that both the year 1945 and 1989 serve as highly charged, overdetermined points of reference for the

writing of German political and intellectual history. These dates took on a certain function within the context of the development of a postwar German mentality. In the following remarks I will try to analyze that function.

Debate

The concept of a “Zero Hour” in German literature has been widely discussed since the 1960s and 1970s by a new generation of literary scholars who doubted the validity of this notion, and who tried to examine its ideological functions within the context of postwar German history. It is useful to summarize the major points of this discussion.

German literature after 1945 was supposed to have made a radical break from the contamination of the German language by Nazi ideology. The quest for a new German literature had already started in American POW camps. Writers such as Hans Werner Richter, Alfred Andersch, Walter Kolbenhoff and others, who were instrumental in formulating the pathos of a new beginning for German letters, were products of reeducation, that ill-fated attempt of the American military authorities to purge the German mentality of fascist elements and to implant the roots of a democratic society. The program of this literary movement was formulated in articles and essays that appeared in the journal *Der Ruf*, a publication intended as a tool of the American military authorities’ attempt to reeducate German POWs. In these manifestoes, the young authors tried to convince their comrades of the existence of a German tradition that had not been contaminated by Nazi ideology. At the same time, they argued for a radical break with the past and a new beginning. The literary program of the writers associated with *Der Ruf* was not particularly concerned with aesthetic problems or questions of style, genre, and literary language. Instead, the writers stressed their contention that morality and the values of a civilized society had to be reintroduced into literature after the devastating effects of National Socialism on the German mind and body. Since Andersch and Richter were more and more inclined toward a socialist way of reorganizing the German mind and body politic, *Der Ruf* was soon prohibited by the authorities. It was then, in 1947, that Hans Werner Richter felt compelled to invite a group of writers and critics, out of which developed the “Group 47.”

It was taken for granted that the year 1945 meant a radical break with the past, not only in political, economic, or moral terms, but that there was a new

beginning in literature also. During the 1960s, however, a new generation of literary scholars started to question this assumption. Stylistic analysis revealed that the texts of Wolfgang Borchert, who had provided one of the representative literary texts of the immediate postwar period, the play *Draussen vor der Tür* (The Man Outside), were heavily influenced by expressionism, a phenomenon of the first two decades of the century.¹ Hans Mayer declared: “The idea of a Zero Hour turned into nothing. Even in the field of literature. Not even German writers were able to wipe from their eyes forgotten weariness, traditions, and prejudices of long ago.”² Several scholars suggested that neither 1933 nor 1945 marked a significant break in the history of German literature. Rather, the period from 1930 to 1960 should be seen as a continuity that was defined by “political and cultural reaction.”³ Other types of continuity were observed as well: In East Germany, the link to the literary past was part of the official cultural politics of the regime. The literature that was produced in the GDR was supposed to have its roots in the classical humanism of Goethe and Schiller while at the same time being an outgrowth of the proletarian writers movement of the 1920s. The forgotten texts of exile writers such as Anna Seghers, Alfred Döblin, Lion Feuchtwanger and so many others were reintroduced into the reading public. The authors of the so-called “Inner Emigration” during the Third Reich, like Gottfried Benn or the writers of nature poems had continued to follow their literary program of artistic self-reliance and a safe distance from the world of politics and social upheaval. Many authors, who became well known after 1945, had published before that date: Günter Eich, Max Frisch, Erich Kästner, Wolfdietrich Schnurre, Wolfgang Koeppen, or Wolfgang Weyrauch (who coined the term *Kahlschlag* or “clearing,” another metaphor for the Zero Hour).

The discussion of the “Zero Hour” during the 1960s and 1970s focused on questions of continuity and discontinuity, on problems of periodization in literary history, and on the role of literary scholarship itself. As a result of this discussion, it is now generally accepted that 1945 was by no means a new beginning or a radical break with the literary past.⁴ The question today is: Does German unification confront us with another defining moment, a rupture or discontinuity, that will force us to change our view of postwar German literature? It is still too early to answer this question, but enough time has passed to take a fresh look at the “Zero Hour” and its meaning for postwar German literature.

Reversal

In 1994, Joseph von Westphalen published *High Noon: A Western Concerning the State of the Nation*.⁵ The title of the book refers to the *Superwahljahr* (Super Election Year) 1994, in which federal elections were held and several state and local legislative bodies were also elected. These elections were widely seen as an instrument to measure public opinion on how the political parties had handled the problems that had arisen from unification. Westphalen, born in 1945 at the “Zero Hour,” tells the story of a man with many names, whose job it was to frighten corrupt politicians by exposing their nefarious schemes. The first person narrator recalls his former life:

I made things hot for certain people, back in the old days. I lit a fire under their asses. I fired my gun all around, it was great fun. My victims deserved what they got. Except for a couple of business crooks, it was mostly this ragged bunch of politicians. The chancellor and his henchmen, who were pulling the strings in those days, were my primary victims. ... I had to be fast and I had to be precise in shooting — in missing, that is. To pepper the ground in front of their feet with bullets or to scratch the earlobes of those oafs in power, that made them nervous. And then the getaway. That was a public circus back then. A leftover from the extraparliamentary opposition, so to speak. The little man’s revenge on the big idiots.⁶

It is obvious that Westphalen has simply taken literally the metaphor of yellow journalism (*Revolver-Journalismus*) and built a story around it. His hero used to be a journalist, who had his heyday in the 1980s, before the end of “that Great War they called the Cold one.” (12) “Joe West” or “Señor Donde” retired in 1990; his personal “High Noon,” his “last show” (86) took place when the unification of the two Germanies was completed, but the various opposition groups in Germany are still in need of his services. Investigative reporting, an offspring of the Vietnam era and Watergate, comes into its own. The year is 1994, and the function of a critical public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) has experienced a significant change:

We shout at the top of our lungs for the power of the state that we used to loathe before, and we also demand tougher sentences. ... We have to teach the authorities how to act determined, we have to educate them. The old social game: to provoke the big losers in power to

attack us and yell at us and then to finish them off—that doesn't work any more. That is the worst of it. ... We ought really to support the authorities, but I don't have the patience for that. ... First one would have to explain to the government fools that the difference between a left-wing protester who wants to prevent a superhighway and a right-wing pig who doesn't want any foreigners around is greater than the distance from the earth to the moon and cannot be reconciled even with the most vague and elastic clauses in the penal code.⁷

Whereas during the time of the Bonn Republic, it was the task of the writer/journalist to oppose the powerful simply because they **were** in power,⁸ in the era of right-wing nationalism and violence against foreigners, the writer's duty is to support the authorities, in fact to prop up the democratic government.

This appears in marked contrast to the text *Westphalen* alludes to in his subtitle. In 1975, Heinrich Böll had written the "Report on the Attitudinal State of the Nation"⁹ a satire of the machinations of the secret service and its actions during the time of the 'Decree concerning Radicals' (*Radikalenerlaß*) and the subsequent hysteria in the west. Böll's text, published in conjunction with Günter Wallraff's "Report on the Attitudinal State of the Secret Service," focuses on the political atmosphere and beliefs (*Gesinnung*) of contemporary West Germany. *Gesinnung* has become a keyword in the discussion on postwar German literature after unification. Böll and Wallraff use the notion of *Gesinnung* as a shibboleth, as a sign of right or wrong, "us" or "them," good or evil. Those in favor of illegal measures to fight terrorism threaten the foundations of the democratic state; those who oppose such measures are the defenders of democracy. *Westphalen*'s narrator criticizes both Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass as representatives of a literature that plays an active role in the public discussion of political, historical, and social issues: "I have always considered it very important not to be regarded as either a court jester or a clown."¹⁰ Joe West is alluding here to Grass's programmatic essay "On Writers as Court Jesters and on Nonexistent Courts,"¹¹ and to Böll's novel *The Clown* (1963), both exemplary texts of a politically engaged literature.

A text such as *Westphalen*'s, which describes the political and economic landscape of Germany in the 1990s, has to take its point of departure elsewhere. *Westphalen*'s task can be fulfilled only by the **Western**. In his view, unification has rendered Germany another "Wild West," a country in which civilization is threatened by anarchic forces. Since western capitalism has won the cold war and proved itself invincible, the 'West' is running wild. The German

filmmaker Tom Toelle, who directed the mini-series *Deutschlandlied*, which was broadcast on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the German capitulation in World War II, draws a similar picture of the time right after the war. In his view, when the war ended a new period began, “the period of the West in Germany, a lawless time, during which power, courage, and strength were important.”¹² This is only one instance in which the end of the Second World War and the end of German separation are viewed as historical parallels.

Westphalen’s *Western* is symptomatic for a change in the understanding of the function of literature in Germany which took place long before German unification and was caused by the introduction of a variety of changes in German political culture in the aftermath of the student rebellion (*Studentenbewegung*) of the late 1960s and the emergence of postmodernism in German culture. In a recent speech the writer Sten Nadolny suggested the dimensions of this change: “Nowadays writers only rarely try to raise themselves to the position of apocalyptic authorities and to be the global conscience for others—readers can see through such tricks of the trade and laugh heartily about them.”¹³ What used to be the hallmark of postwar German literature, its function as a substitute conscience, by the 1990s has become a laughing stock, a cheap trick, immediately recognized as such by the reader.

Functions

In October 1990, Frank Schirrmacher, writing in the influential *Feuilleton* of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, maintained that the literatures of both the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic were coming to an end.¹⁴ The main reason for this demise was the fact that during the past thirty or forty years, there had been no development in literary or aesthetic questions: the literary protagonists of the 1960s were still the same in the 1990s: Grass, Böll, Johnson, Weiss, Walser, Lenz, Rühmkorf, and Fried. Small matter that some of them had died already, these names still stood for what could be called contemporary German literature. “Group 47,” although disbanded for almost twenty years, still supposedly dominated literary life, and, much more importantly, still had a monopoly on what Schirrmacher calls “Federal Republican consciousness of the Federal Republic.” He goes on: “To be a speaker and a representative of the nation; to this day, that is the function of a great many literary protagonists.”¹⁵ The function of this kind of

literature is to provide an identity, an “intact ego.” According to Schirmmacher, only literature can achieve this, only in literature is it possible to build up “the private and public consciousness of West Germany.” But there is a price to pay: Precisely because West German literature is fixated on working through the Nazi past, it can not have any kind of future in the changed world at the end of the cold war. The “founding myth” of the Federal Republic that could only be provided in and by literature was based on an obsession with the past.

As an analysis of literary texts written in Germany between 1945 and 1990, Schirmmacher’s account is obviously flawed: postwar German literature never constituted the monolithic block Schirmmacher presents. The polemics of the 1960s—by Enzensberger and others—had caused a reorientation in literary production. Apart from the old guard of “Group 47,” there were countless new names appearing on the literary scene (Franz Xaver Kroetz, Botho Strauss, Sten Nadolny, Patrick Süskind, Christoph Ransmayer, Doris Dörrie, Katja Behrens, Dieter Forte, Rainald Goetz, Ludwig Fels; the list can go on and on), as well as older writers who were never closely associated with the group. But there are other, more important, problems with Schirmmacher’s analysis. The Zero Hour takes on an important meaning in Schirmmacher’s construction:

The Zero Hour was the inaccessible beginning of history, the caesura that separated us from the previous world, the departure from the Holocaust and from everything that had led to it—from here on everything that followed would develop in a linear fashion. Out of this confidence the literary consciousness of the postwar period came into existence.¹⁶

Although the “Zero Hour” had long been deconstructed as a mythical structure, Schirmmacher acted as if it had never been put into question. In order to depict postwar German literature as a monolithic block, as a body of texts that relies on a fixation with the past, Schirmmacher has to ground it in an apocalyptic event that never happened. Schirmmacher offers us a paper tiger, a picture of a group of worn out, tired, and anachronistic literary figures, who are well beyond their prime, and whose texts have become the impotent mutterings of a time long gone. The question is: why does Schirmmacher find it necessary to build up or rather to resuscitate this paper tiger?

In his critique of Schirmmacher’s account, Jochen Vogt suggests that by “fighting the literary battles of yesteryear”¹⁷ Schirmmacher and others (Ulrich

Greiner, Karl Heinz Bohrer) were trying to prevent German literature after unification from taking on a role similar to that of 1945, i.e. pointing to the moral, social, political, or economic shortcomings of the event—in this case unification—and providing a forum for critical voices who otherwise would have no access to public opinion.

A New Zero Hour?

Schirmmacher's account presupposes that there were two defining moments—1945 and 1989—that delimit a continuity, that outline a stable entity called “postwar German literature.” In opposition to this, I would like to stress the discontinuities of the postwar period and to claim that the ruptures and radical breaks during this time by far outweigh the superficiality of a seemingly continuous historical period. In fact I would like to argue that the years 1945 to 1989/90 cannot be considered a unified period called “postwar German literature” at all.¹⁸ I offer three considerations.

My first point concerns the supposedly defining element of “postwar German literature,” its obsession with the past, its insistence on coming to terms with German guilt, and its search for the missing father. While it is true that coming to terms with the past has played a crucial role in post-1945 German literature, from Böll and Grass to the so-called *Vaterbücher* or *Elternbücher* of a younger generation in the 1970s and 1980s,¹⁹ it is simply not true that the function of literature with respect to the German past has remained unchanged.

The theoretical model on which such a static view of the function of postwar German literature is ultimately based is a seminal 1967 study by Margarete and Alexander Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn*. Using Freud's theory of fascism in his essay *Mass Psychology and Ego Analysis* (1921), the Mitscherlichs explained the moral indifference many Germans showed toward the victims of the Third Reich and the general unwillingness to confront the recent past with an inability to let go of the “*Führer*,” who, through a process of identification, had become the collective love-object of a whole nation.

In the context of the present debate, however, it is all too often overlooked that the Mitscherlichs' analysis was targeted on the time when their book appeared—1967. The “Mitscherlich model,” as I would like to call it, is useful when employed in looking at the generation of the immediate perpetrators

and victims of the *Shoah*. But its analytical and theoretical scope is limited to the generation that experienced National Socialism first hand. The model loses much of its analytical power when we consider the effects of the fascist past after the 1960s.²⁰

The second and third generations after the *Shoah* present us with a more diversified picture than the Mitscherlichs drew in their 1967 study. Texts like the *Elternbücher* show a variety of reactions of children to their parents' past. These reactions span the whole range from true mourning to not being able to come to terms with the crimes of their fathers (or mothers). Psychological scholarship—using a similar argument as Margarete Mitscherlich employed—has established that most of the complexities in cases like these stem from the problems the children of Nazi perpetrators had in identifying with their parents.²¹ These cases of ego deficiency were caused by the weakness of the ego ideal (the father), an ego ideal that had experienced not only the loss of the collective love object, the “*Führer*,” but also the narcissistic injury of losing the war. A document of the problems the descendants of Nazis have today is Peter Sichrovsky's collection of interviews *Born Guilty: The Children of Nazi Families* (1987).²² These texts show that is not sufficient to claim that the children of the Nazis have simply inherited the psychological problems of their parents. Moreover, the increasing amount of public attention to these cases during the 1970s and 1980s indicates that it is no longer in literature alone that the problem of the Nazi past is negotiated and renegotiated. It is important to note in this context that the psychological and scholarly treatment of the traumatic experience of the Holocaust did not start until the 1960s, with the German legislation to “provide restitution to the victims of the Nazi regime.”²³ Since the appearance of *The Inability to Mourn* in 1967, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy have come a long way. When the children of former Nazi perpetrators and victims entered psychotherapeutic treatment, literature was no longer the sole arena for coming to terms with the past. The major function of postwar German literature can no longer be described as reworking the past. This is not to say that the problem of the Nazi past is no longer of concern to German writers. It obviously is. My point is that since the early 1970s German literature has no longer been obsessed with the past. Schirmmayer's argument is based on the assumption that “postwar German literature” never managed to overcome this obsession. What is crucial is not so much what writers actually intended but rather what function literature has

had at two different historical times that were separated by the rupture of the late 1960s. Due to the change of generations and the loss of the function of being the *only* discourse available for dealing with the past, literature in Germany after the late 1960s does not have the function Schirmmacher assigns it. After a considerable delay, psychoanalysis has taken over at least part of the function of coming to terms with the Nazi past.²⁴ This shift occurred long after 1945 and long before 1989.

In an essay entitled “Commonplaces on the Newest Literature,” first published in 1968, Hans Magnus Enzensberger claimed that the rupture which separated an earlier period of postwar German literature from a later phase occurred during the 1960s.²⁵ Arguing from a materialist point of view, Enzensberger claims that the then fashionable myth of the “death of literature” is not a new phenomenon and can not be substantiated by the facts. Rather, the feelings of “discomfort, impatience, and disgust” that have “seized writers and readers to a degree that ... is new and unheard of” must be explained by the “insight” that “literature, perhaps even more than other products, is at the mercy of the laws of the marketplace” (36f). It is the sudden understanding of the dependency of literature on the laws of the market that creates a change in the function of literature in society. According to Enzensberger, German literature after 1945 was assigned the role of demonstrating that there had been a “transformation,” that the Germans had left behind the Nazi past and had evolved along the lines of a democratic society. According to Enzensberger, “Literature was supposed to take the place of a void in the Federal Republic—the absence of a genuine political life” (38). In Enzensberger’s view, that void had now been filled by the political activism of the late 1960s. Writers who were still acting—and writing—as if they were the preceptors of the nation were greeted by audiences “with salvos of laughter” (39). The result of Enzensberger’s analysis is sobering: “Literary works cannot be accorded an essential social function under present conditions” (43).

Even if one does not agree with Enzensberger’s radical critique of literary production, one can easily observe that Schirmmacher is using a similar set of arguments to prove his point: that German literature after 1945 was obsessed with the past, and that it therefore did not have a future. Schirmmacher has simply extended the historical framework to include the years up to 1989, but the underlying assumption remains the same. Although for different reasons, literature can no longer function as a moral institution, an instrument

for negotiating a collective consciousness. Thus, Schirmmacher has claimed for German literature from 1945 to 1989 what Enzensberger had detected in German literature around the year 1968, although the two critics come to opposite conclusions. Enzensberger proposes to overcome and leave behind the traditional means of literary production—“the book, individual authorship, the distribution limits of the market, the separation of theoretical and practical work” (44)—in order to arrive at meaningful communication.

If Enzensberger’s point—that around 1968 literature in West Germany lost many of its public functions—is accurate, then Schirmmacher’s construction of a unified German postwar consciousness produced in and by literature is not tenable. Any observer of the literary field who is not blinded by romantic or idealistic notions of the influence of literature on post-industrial societies has to agree with Enzensberger. Jochen Vogt concurs. In his critique of Schirmmacher, he states that literature has lost its central role as a moral and public institution. These functions have been taken over to a considerable degree by “a relatively developed political public sphere or the resistance to it, the mass media, and an alternative cultural movement.”²⁶

My third point concerns what is most questionable in Schirmmacher’s argument: the construction of a unified, stable, and discernible West German postwar consciousness that dominated West German political and cultural life from the Zero Hour to unification. Again, I would argue that from the late 1960s on, a conformity of this kind no longer existed in West German society. The student movement, terrorism, and the new political movements have their roots in the rupture that occurred during the 1960s. One way to capture the meaning of these discontinuities is to use the term “postmodernism” for a period in German literature that starts at that time. A working definition of postmodernism includes three elements: “The Death of Man,” “The Death of History,” and “The Death of Metaphysics.”²⁷ The notion of the “Death of Man” opposes “all essentialist conceptions of human being or nature” and states that “the subject is merely another position in language.” The thesis of “The Death of History” deconstructs the notion of history as an entity that provides “unity, homogeneity, totality, closure, and identity.” With the “Death of Metaphysics” is meant an opposition to “most western philosophers’ desire, which is to master the world once and for all by enclosing it within an illusory but absolute system they believe represents or corresponds to a unitary Being beyond history, particularity and change....”²⁸

Although still fairly general, this definition of the term “postmodernism” can help outline some of the characteristics of German literature—both east and west—after the 1960s. The importance of and, indeed, insistence on non-identity, a constructive ideological homelessness, mistrust of traditional authorities, retreat into regional life worlds abound in German literary texts from the 1960s on. Taken together, this attitude creates what Wolfgang Iser sees as the defining moment of postmodernism, a “radical plurality.”²⁹ It is this plurality, I would argue, that provides the distinctive mark of German literature during and after the 1960s. This very plurality cannot be reconciled with Schirrmacher’s account of the literary field in Germany from 1945 to 1989.

When looking at individual texts, the notion of postmodernism is by now more and more often applied to canonical texts of the German postwar literary tradition. Günter Grass’s novel *The Tin Drum* (1959) is today being regarded as one of the standard bearers of “historiographic metafiction” (Linda Hutcheon)³⁰ or of the postmodern historical novel (Brian McHale). Other texts written in the 1950s and 1960s can be considered postmodern as well. If postmodernism means the “death of the subject,” Uwe Johnson’s *Speculations about Jacob* (1959) can be called postmodern, as can Max Frisch’s *Stiller* (1954) and Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Malina* (1971). If “postmodern,” on the other hand, following Leslie Fiedler,³¹ means to bridge the gap between elite and mass culture, then authors such as Patrick Süskind and Christoph Ransmayr, who gained fame during the 1980s, belong in the same category as Grass, Frisch, and Bachmann earlier.

This is not the forum for a full justification of the term “postmodernism” for the period in German literature from the 1960s to the present. The only way to accomplish this justification would be to carry out in-depth readings of literary texts from this period and to show to what extent they confirm or put into question an appropriate understanding of postmodernism. I would like, however, to add some remarks on the usefulness of the term as suggested here. Many commentators have noted that “postmodernism” can be used for almost any historical period. Jean-François Lyotard sees postmodernism as beginning with Aristotle, and Umberto Eco has even suspected that Homer will be declared the beginning of postmodernism.³² It is true that by now there is hardly any agreement on when postmodernism actually started. But this lack of agreement alone is no reason to avoid the concept as a temporal marker altogether. Other period names confront us with the same problem of

a seeming timelessness attached to them (Classicism, Romanticism, Realism, etc.) and we still use them as heuristic devices. This does not necessarily mean that we essentialize the discursive output or minimize the diversity of the periods we identify with these markers.

On the other hand, the name “postmodernism” for the period in German literature from the 1960s to the 1990s (and beyond?) has a distinctive advantage. Because of its definition, which entails non-closure, non-identity, and opposition to universalizing and totalizing tendencies, it deconstructs journalistic delusions, ideological rambling, and ahistorical constructions such as Frank Schirrmacher’s account of postwar German literature. If we can discern distinct continuities for the period from 1930 to 1960, and if postmodernism starts in the 1960s and is continuing through the 1990s, neither “Zero Hour” nor “High Noon” were the defining moments of postwar German literature. There are, in my judgement, even strong indications for the fact that postmodernism comes into its own after the collapse of the communist regimes in central and eastern Europe and German unification. For now, the defining element of postmodernism, a radical plurality that does not promote totalitarian solutions to the problems inherent in cultural diversity, has a chance to determine cultural life. On the other hand, it is possible that with the end of the Cold War and the victory of western capitalism, postmodernism—in the sense just mentioned—is also coming to an end. But it is still too early to tell.

ENDNOTES

¹. Hans Mayer, *Deutsche Literatur seit Thomas Mann* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1968), pp. 54-57.

². “Mit dem Jahre Null war es nichts. Auch nicht im Bereich der Literatur. Längst vergessene Müdigkeiten, Überlieferungen und Vorurteile konnten auch die deutschen Schriftsteller nicht abtun von ihren Lidern.” Mayer, op. cit., p. 53.

³. David Roberts, “Nullpunkt und kein Ende? Perspectives and Theses on Postwar German Literature,” *Orbis Litterarum* 35(1980) pp. 250-273, here, p. 255. Roberts, however, maintains the year 1945 as “the great divide which none of the writers established before 1933 crossed” (264). He concedes only that the “period c. 1930 to c. 1960 does represent continuity — the continuity of exclusion” (262).

⁴. Wolfgang Emmerich, “Nullpunkt,” in *Kulturpolitisches Wörterbuch Bundesrepublik Deutschland/ Deutsche Demokratische Republik im Vergleich*, ed. Wolfgang R.

Langenbucher, Ralf Rytlewski, and Bernd Weyergraf (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1983), pp. 538-542. In their volume *Deutsche Literatur in der Bundesrepublik seit 1965* (Königstein: Athenäum, 1980), the editors Paul Michael Lützeler and Egon Schwarz suggest the years 1965/66 as marking the decisive shift in the history of the Federal Republic (7). There are still scholars, however, who treat this new understanding of period boundaries with skepticism and who subscribe to the concept of a “Zero Hour” in German literature; cf. Günter Blumberger, *Versuch über den deutschen Gegenwartsroman: Krisenbewußtsein und Neubegründung im Zeichen der Melancholie* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1985), p. 63.

⁵. Joseph von Westphalen, *High Noon: Ein Western zur Lage der Nation* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1994).

⁶. Westphalen, pp. 9f.

⁷. Westphalen, pp. 110f.

⁸. A similar position can be found in an interview that Hans Magnus Enzensberger gave the SPIEGEL in 1987. Enzensberger said: “Slowly but surely among intellectuals the understanding is spreading that their old role as preceptors is done for. You would have to use a magnifying glass to find the famous writer who deludes himself that he is the conscience of the nation.” Quoted in: Jochen Vogt, “Langer Abschied von der Nachkriegsliteratur? Ein Kommentar zum letzten westdeutschen Literaturstreit,” in Vogt, *‘Erinnerung ist unsere Aufgabe’: Über Literatur, Moral und Politik 1945-1990* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1991), pp. 173-187; here, p. 183. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

⁹. Heinrich Böll and Günter Wallraff, *Berichte zur Gesinnungslage der Nation/Berichte zur Gesinnungslage des Staatsschutzes* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1977).

¹⁰. Westphalen, p. 98.

¹¹. Günter Grass, *Cat and Mouse and other Writings*, ed. A. Leslie Willson (New York: Continuum, 1994), pp. 283-288.

¹². “... die Westernzeit Deutschlands, eine gesetzlose Zeit, in der Kraft, Mut und Stärke wichtig waren.” Quoted from DER SPIEGEL no. 17, 1995, p. 216.

¹³. Sten Nadolny, “Die Warnung vor dem Leser: Rede über eine neuerliche Weltrettung” *Neue Rundschau* 106.2 (1995), p. 117. The recognition that something has changed in the German literary landscape has even made it into the pages of *The Economist*: “There was a time, if you were a postwar German writer, when you knew where things stood. Your one theme was Germany and you were expected to be its conscience as well as its chronicler. Hissed at by the right, loved on the left, you were always in demand, in

lecture halls, on television, in the street. ... But that was 25 years ago. Generations and tastes have changed. So has politics, and, more to the point, so have the connections between politics and writers, especially novelists." *The Economist*, March 12, 1994, p. 97.

¹⁴. Frank Schirrmacher, "Abschied von der Literatur der Bundesrepublik," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 2, 1990: L1-2. For a summary of Schirrmacher's argument and a brief discussion, see: Jochen Vogt, "Have the Intellectuals Failed? On the Sociopolitical Claims and the Influence of Literary Intellectuals in West Germany," *New German Critique* 58 (1993): pp. 3-23, here: pp. 10-17. See also Vogt, "Langer Abschied," op. cit.

¹⁵. "Sprecher und Repräsentant der Nation zu sein; das ist bis heute die Funktion eines beträchtlichen Teils der literarischen Protagonisten." Schirrmacher, p. 1.

¹⁶. "Die Stunde Null war der unüberschreitbare Anfang der Geschichte, die Zäsur zur Vorwelt, der Abschied vom Holocaust und von allem, was zu ihm geführt hatte — von hier aus würde sich alles andere linear fortentwickeln. In dieser Zuversicht ist das literarische Nachkriegsbewußtsein entstanden." Schirrmacher, p. 1.

¹⁷. Vogt, "Langer Abschied von der Nachkriegsliteratur?" p. 61.

¹⁸. I suggest that it makes more sense to use the term "postwar literature" within the German context only for the years 1945-1949, and that the currency reform in 1948 and its aftermath was the defining moment for postwar German literature. See Ralf Schnell, "'Nullpunkt.' Umbruch oder Kontinuität? Traditionsbezüge der deutschen Nachkriegsliteratur," in: Wolfgang Beutin et. al., *Deutsche Literaturgeschichte: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1992), pp. 435-448; here, pp. 440f.

¹⁹. *Die kleine Figur meines Vaters* (1975) by Peter Henisch, *Mitteilung an den Adel* (1976) by Elisabeth Plessen, *Der Mann auf der Kanzel: Fragen an einen Vater* (1979) by Ruth Rehmann, *Suchbild: Über meinen Vater* by Christoph Meckel (1980), and *Die Hecke* (1983) by Hanns-Josef Ortheil, to name just a few. For a discussion of these texts, see Ralph Gehrke, *Literarische Spurensuche: Elternbilder im Schatten der NS-Vergangenheit* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1992).

²⁰. Margarete Mitscherlich has recently argued that her earlier conclusions are to a large extent still valid. See Mitscherlich, *Erinnerungsarbeit: Zur Psychoanalyse der Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1987).

²¹. See Erich Simenauer, "A Double Helix: Some Determinants of the Self-Perpetuation of Nazism," *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 33 (1978), pp. 411-425; Erich Simenauer, "Die zweite Generation — danach. Die Wiederkehr der Verfolgermentalität in

Psychoanalysen," *Jahrbuch der Psychoanalyse* 12 (1981), pp. 8-17; Lutz Rosenkötter, "Die Idealbildung in der Generationenfolge," *Psyche* 35.7 (1981), pp. 593-599; F.-W. Eickhoff, "Identification and its Vicissitudes in the Context of the Nazi Phenomenon," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 67 (1986), pp. 33-44.

²². Peter Sichrovsky, *Born Guilty: The Children of Nazi Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1988). The German original was entitled *Schuldig geboren: Kinder aus Nazifamilien* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1987). Similar kinds of material can be found in Dan Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence: Encounters with Children of the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) and Dörte von Westernhagen, *Die Kinder der Täter: Das dritte Reich und die Generation danach* (Munich: Kösel, 1987).

²³. See *Generations of the Holocaust*, ed. Martin S. Bergmann and Milton E. Jucovy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 7. This legislation, called "Wiedergutmachung," (making good again) was passed in the early 1950s, against considerable resistance from conservative circles in the Federal Republic.

²⁴. See Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, "Vom Konkretismus zur Metaphorik: Gedanken zur psychoanalytischen Arbeit mit Nachkommen der Holocaust-Generation—anlässlich einer Neuerscheinung" *Psyche* 38 (1984), pp. 1-28, here: 1. The recognition that literature and psychoanalysis are indeed competitors is not new. Freud already acknowledged the uncanny resemblance of both discourses. For a discussion, see Sarah Kofman, *Freud and Fiction*, trans. Sarah Wykes (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991).

²⁵. An English version of this essay can be found in: Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Critical Essays*, trans. Michael Roloff Stuart Hood and the author (New York: Continuum, 1982), 35-45. The German original appeared in *Kursbuch* 15 (1968).

²⁶. Vogt, "Erinnerung ist unsere Aufgabe," p. 185.

²⁷. A recent discussion among feminist scholars on the relationship between feminism and postmodernism took this definition put forth by Jane Flax as its point of departure. See Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 18.

²⁸. Benhabib, et. al., p. 18.

²⁹. Wolfgang Iser, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne* (Weinheim: VCH Verlagsgesellschaft, 1987), pp. 4f.

³⁰. See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. ix. For Hutcheon, postmodernism in literature manifests itself most explicitly in the novel. By "historiographic metafiction" she means "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically

also lay claim to historical events and personages” (5).

³¹. Fiedler gave a lecture “The Case for Post-Modernism” at Freiburg University. The year was 1968. See Thomas Anz, “Über die Lust an Literatur und die Lustlosigkeit der Literaturwissenschaft,” *Neue Rundschau* 106.2 (1995), pp. 133-148, here: 138. Anz adopts Fiedler’s understanding of postmodernism.

³². Welsch, p. 10.

ADORNO'S PHILOSOPHY OF POETRY AFTER AUSCHWITZ FROM A POSTWALL PERSPECTIVE

Neil H. Donahue

In the light of **any** historical event, whether World War II and the Holocaust, or Germany's reunification, poetry as a genre appears inadequate. Against the immediacy and topicality of drama or the broadly descriptive detail of places and characters in the novel, poetry seems unable to measure up to demands for representation and commentary. In the context of post-World War II Germany in particular, poetry seems to suffer from a broad perception of its insufficiencies, partly as a result of Adorno's notorious remark that, "to write a poem after Auschwitz, is barbaric..."¹ Adorno's comment is memorable, is frequently and routinely cited, and figures as a general point of reference in discussions of the genre in its relation to history.² The statement has achieved wide currency and, in isolation, seems to suggest a special inappropriateness of poetry when faced with the horrors of history, **as if** the elevation of sensitivity required to write or even read poetry were helplessly at odds with the depths of depravity and inhumanity in history, and **as if** a poem on such a topic would thus reflect, in its beauty, a peculiar and almost equally depraved indifference to those horrors.

Yet the broad reception of Adorno's remark is wrong, and that famous line is largely misunderstood and continues to mislead.³ Stated bluntly, Adorno's dictum does not at all interdict poetry. Rather, the context of the remark suggests something different:

The more total the society, the more reified also the spirit [mind] and all the more paradoxical its beginning, of itself to extricate itself from reification. Yet even the most extreme consciousness of calamity threatens to degenerate into empty chatter. Cultural critique finds itself opposite the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that eats away also at that insight that explains why it has become impossible to write poetry today. (30-31)

A close reading in reverse of this passage will reveal its real meaning and also reverse the common perception of its most famous line. That remark appears after a full colon following the word "opposite" (*gegenüber*), both of which separate the cultural critic from the view that Adorno here articulates but does

not subscribe to, which would constitute the “last stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism.” Instead, Adorno delivers in that much-quoted remark a pointed overstatement of a position dialectically antithetical to his own.⁴ Elsewhere, in his *Minima Moralia* (1951), he in fact notes the necessity for critical cognition of such overstatement: “of exaggeration, of overshooting the object” (*Minima Moralia*, 126).⁵ Ultimately, for Adorno, as long as a cultural critic can give voice, in an essay or in poetry, to such insight into the dangerous dialectic of culture and barbarism, then that final stage has not been reached, and a space, a critical perspective and possibility for resistance, however tenuous, has been preserved.

The ability to give voice, however, is not self-evident and cannot be confused with the legal right to do so in a democracy. The body of Adorno’s essay on “Cultural Criticism and Society” devotes itself to describing the plight of essayistic cultural criticism and the risks it runs of cooptation and complicity: “Cultural criticism shares with its object its delusion. It is incapable of confronting its own tenuousness” (19). Even the dialectical critique of ideology, as opposed to cultural criticism, runs that risk at another remove; if it does not apply itself and enter into its object, it falls victim to its own presuppositions. No precept should become final dogma that blocks access to the object. Adorno here inserts a comment that adumbrates his view of the function of poetry: “Non-ideological, however, is the thought that does not allow itself to be paraphrased in ‘operational terms’ [English in original], but rather attempts to help the matter itself to that language, from which the dominant [operational language] otherwise cuts it off” (23) and as immanent criticism “seeks to translate this knowledge into the force of examination of the matter itself” (*sucht dies Wissen in die Kraft der Betrachtung der Sache selbst umzusetzen*) (27). In other words, immanent criticism avoids facile generalizations and seeks its own apt formulations that resist, in their specificity, paraphrase into a positive discourse and instead yield insight into the substance of a thing, laying bare the tensions that constitute its form and its relation to society (its “doubleness”) (28). What prevents the immanent method from falling back into just another conceptual fetish is the “spontaneous relation to the object” (29), which figures most prominently in the language of poetry.

Not by accident does the essay end with the negative mention of an unwritten poem, as an inverted assertion of Adorno’s favored literary genre. Poetry is both the specific model for and the fulfillment of the general critical

principles that Adorno prescribes for immanent, dialectical criticism of culture. Adorno's argument in "Cultural Criticism and Society" works its way forward toward the idea of poetry that emerges suddenly in a negative formulation at the end. His essay describes in interwoven alternations the pitfalls of two kinds of cultural criticism, the transcendent and the ideological, in order to circumscribe an immanent method between the two that paradoxically aspires, as analysis, to the condition of poetry in its "spontaneous" relation to its respective object.⁶ In other words, Adorno's essay poses formal demands that are inseparable from the substance of its ideas: that intimate relation between the two dimensions of form and content in the final passage demands "close reading" as a poem of sorts which concentrates the rhetorical force of the preceding negative dialectics of the essay. Not to do so misses the point, and this is the history of his remark's reception.

In the sentence preceding the dictum on Auschwitz, Adorno had anticipated the fate of his own dialectically overstated remark: "Yet even the most extreme consciousness of calamity threatens to degenerate into empty chatter." Is this what happened to his own remark, taken at face value? Adorno's dictum on poetry after Auschwitz should be read instead as a manifesto, a negative provocation **for** the writing of poetry which asserts, and does not surrender, the redeeming potential of culture against the forces of reification (whether ideological, commercial, or military) that threaten again and again to become total.⁷ In order to recuperate the subject out of the historical scenario of its threatened erasure, and rescue the individual from the totalizing forces of technological society at war (or, for that matter, at peace in a state of *Wirtschaftswunder*), serious poetry does not flee to the opposite pole of experience but confronts what appears most antithetical to it. Hence, as Adorno noted: "all the more paradoxical its beginning."

In other words, Adorno also advocates, through dialectically negative assertion, a new beginning born of the paradox—"of itself to extricate itself from reification"—a new beginning to which poetry is central. Thus, the apparent contradiction of elevated, difficult and even elegant poetry about the horrors of war and the Holocaust becomes the necessary paradox of a new beginning, a zero hour of cultural criticism and of lyrical poetry, that does not dispense with the past but confronts, engages and assimilates the very forces that threaten to extinguish the subject. The last sentence of Adorno's essay warns that, "The critical spirit is not equal to [the forces of] absolute reification

[with an important qualification in the very last words of the essay], as long as it remains unto itself in self-satisfied contemplation” (31). Adorno here alludes to and rejects the sort of banal, escapist “nature poetry” of the immediate postwar period.⁸

Similarly, in a later essay entitled “Engagement” from 1962,⁹ he returns to that same famous remark on poetry after Auschwitz in order to reject equally the other, opposite tendency toward explicit politics in literature:

The sentence, after Auschwitz to write lyrical poetry is barbaric, I wouldn't want to qualify: therein is stated negatively the impulse that animates [politically] engaged literature. (422)

Adorno frames his understanding of poetry between two opposing and equally unacceptable tendencies, both of which surrender the intimate, dialectical relationship of poetry as a genre to the subject and to society. Neither an escape into distant poetic contemplation of eternal verities nor immediate political engagement suffices to rescue the individual subject in its historicity (i.e. its consciousness of its place in history) from the ravages of history. Both escape and engagement succumb to ideologically predetermined forms of reification or indoctrination and would not meet the standard of intense individuation that defines the language (object) and author (subject) of a good poem. Good poetry, however, is, by inverse implication, the locus of freedom and of hope for its universal realization in society, in short, a utopian moment.¹⁰

Adorno gives to poetry a privileged status, not above and beyond, but rather within history, where music, mind, morality, and the material word meet to give meaning to the world. Adorno's most extended discussion of poetry as a genre is his “Lecture on Poetry and Society” (1957).¹¹ Poetry maintains primacy of place in his understanding of art because, unlike music, poetry is above all a construct of language and as such remains, however distantly, mimetic, but is also, among literary genres, the least referential and most subjective:

The greatest lyrical constructs are thus those in which the subject, without a residue of mere [mimetic] material, intones in language to the point where language itself resounds. The self-effacement of the subject, which gives itself over completely to language, and the immediacy and instinctiveness [involuntariness] of its expression, are the same: thus does language mediate most intimately [*im*

Innersten] between poetry and society. (56)

Yet the language of poetry is not a reflection of Being that dissolves the subject, as Heidegger might have it, but rather language defines the conscious historical subject. Poetry reconstitutes the subjectivity of individuals in society against forms of abstract functionalism, with the proviso: “The more, however, their preponderance over the subject increases, all the more precarious becomes the situation of poetry” (57). Poetry is thus the most sensitive genre to register in language the state of the subject in history. Poetry’s “privilege” is to bear the burden of witness to history and of cognitive resistance in society, regardless of a poem’s theme and not necessarily through description or even direct reference.¹²

In another essay, “Those Twenties” (1962), Adorno returned to postwar Germany to extend his understanding of poetry to all art:¹³

The notion of a culture resurrected after Auschwitz is illusory and perverse, and for that reason, each and every cultural artifact that comes into existence has to pay the bitter price. Because even though the world has survived its own destruction, it needs art all the same as its involuntary historiography. The authentic artists of the present are those in whose works the most extreme horror resonates. (53)

Here, Adorno states directly the conviction that also animated the dialectical construction of his earlier comment on poetry after Auschwitz, that the postwar, post-Holocaust world **needs** art in order to register, beyond the factual, precisely that which deliberate historiography cannot account for. If we recall the critic Herbert Ihering’s words of disillusionment with German postwar culture from 1947, cited by Stephen Brockmann (“On the surface there is movement, but in the deeper layers of thought and sensibility, we encounter a hardening, even a petrification”), we can then understand Adorno’s position of two years later in 1949, whereby poetry gets beneath the surface of public discourse into the depths of mind and emotion in order to unsettle such sclerosis of conscience and impede the reification of the individual subject. Poetry is the conscious historical subject’s last stand.

In his *Negative Dialectics* (1966), Adorno provides the philosophical background for the anti-systemic form of “negative dialectics” that the poem embodies. Whereas his essay on cultural criticism culminated in a dialectically negative presentation of the possibility, indeed necessity, of poetry, now, he

negates that negation: “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems [*nach Auschwitz ließe kein Gedicht mehr sich schreiben*]” (312; 355), where his use of the subjunctive mood refers both to his earlier utterance and its subsequent misunderstanding. His philosophy as a whole, in its central arguments as well as in its own formal intricacy, surges toward the idea of the poem as the irreducible verbal concretion of dialectical *Kulturkritik*, the redemptive core within the relentless self-criticism of philosophy and culture made necessary by Auschwitz:

Thinking, in order to be true, these days in any case, has also to think against itself. If thought is not measured against the extremity that eludes the concept, then it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims. (365; *ND* 358)

In this comment Adorno frames the project of philosophy against the historical horizon of the Holocaust, set by poets such as Nelly Sachs and Paul Celan, both of whom had introduced the motif of “musical accompaniment” into their poetry in order to confront that extreme of “cultivated” barbarism and lament the victims.

In retrospect, we can distinguish Adorno’s actual remark from the two poles of misunderstanding in its reception: on the one hand, as an indictment of poetry’s futility and its inevitable slide, in the face of historical catastrophe, into muteness; and, on the other hand, as a call to an activist, more politically engaged and less lyrical poetry. In its proper context, Adorno’s comment resides where poetry and cultural criticism meet, between those two poles, defined by the paradox of autonomy and critique, at one and the same time dependent on the nuances of specific formulation but independent of social forces of coercion (identity thinking) that it in turn indicts and resists. Nonetheless, those two poles of misunderstanding determined the course of discussion about postwar poetry, also in terms of a “Zero Hour.” For just one example, Hans Bender’s comment from 1962 (“*Diktaturen ersticken das Gedicht*” [Dictatorships smother the poem])¹⁴ argues for a complete renewal of German poetry after the twelve-year hiatus of Nazism, whereas, in contrast, Heinrich Vormweg in 1971 and Helmut Korte in 1989 argue against any such notion as a “Zero Hour,” citing the enduring lines of continuity from the 1920s and 1930s

into the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁵ Both arguments are overstated, and neither is wholly true. The notion of a “Zero Hour” for German poetry after the war does not apply in any simple sense. Adorno’s notion of a “paradoxical beginning” by which poetry begins “of itself to extricate itself” from a culture of ideological reification or *Gleichschaltung*, brings us closest to the historical complexity of that moment and to the actual poetry. With this revised understanding of Adorno’s position, Peter Demetz’s comment on the 1950s makes sense: that the “lyric poem [was] the dominant genre of the period” (3).¹⁶

Already before the war’s end, in her wrenchingly mournful and somberly beautiful poem “Chorus of the Saved,” Nelly Sachs introduced a motif of music and death that anticipated Adorno’s “last stage of culture and barbarism”: “We the saved,/ from whose hollow bones, Death had already carved its pipes,/ on whose sinews Death [had] already scraped its bow.”¹⁷ But in her title and the next line she invokes the potential of poetry to confront horror and death as lament “with our mutilated music.” Otherwise, “our barely contained pain [could] burst forth/ and sweep us away.” Poetry is not just consolation, but an act of mourning that turns pain to purpose.

Just after the war, Günter Eich’s 1948 volume *Remote Farmsteads*,¹⁸ in its title and some of the poems, would seem to suggest the opposite mode, typical of the period, of escapism into sublime nature poetry. Many poets of the immediate postwar period embraced a sort of latter-day German Romantic pantheism and piety of nature, with the hope, probably, that a good Lord would intervene, regardless of crimes or questions of culpability, as in Goethe’s *Faust, Part I*, and pronounce a universal pardon: “Ist gerettet!” [Is saved!]. Instead, Eich subverts the sublime in its gross disparity to subsistence and survival. In the first three (of four) strophes of his poem “Latrine,” for example, he goes so far as to juxtapose vowel and bowel movements:

Über stinkendem Graben,
Papier voll Blut und Urin
umschwirrt von funkelnden Fliegen,
hocke ich in den Knien,

Above the stinking ditch
Paper full of blood and urine
buzzing with glittering flies
I hunch on my knees

den Blick auf bewaldete Ufer,
Gärten, gestrandetes Boot.
In den Schlamm der Verwesung
klatscht der versteinte Kot.

looking at the wooded banks,
gardens, a stranded boat.
In the mud of rot and decay
splats the rockhard crap.

Irr mir im Ohre schallen
Verse von Hölderlin.
In schneeiger Reinheit spiegeln
Wolken sich im Urin.

Oddly in my ear resound
verses by Hölderlin.
In snowy purity are mirrored
clouds in the urine. (41)

Eich contrasts the audible effects of his outhouse visit to his recollection of lines from Germany's great Romantic poet, Hölderlin, and then rhymes that name with urine, undermining all its elevated connotations. The German word "irr" captures the narrator's own surprise, confusion, perplexity at the sudden juxtaposition of these two so different experiences in a grotesquely poignant variation on a Proustian epiphany. By highlighting the disjunction between art and immediate postwar experience, Eich, in effect, closes the gap between the poles of descriptive reference to war and refuge in an artistic sublime, and thereby engages the paradox of poetry at the "Zero Hour."

In 1952, Paul Celan's "Fugue of Death" depicts directly Adorno's "last stage in the dialectic of culture and barbarism" in the images of the sentimental and brutal Nazi writing tender letters to his beloved and commanding musical accompaniment to executions, mass burials, and cremations. Celan does here what Adorno did in his essay: he sets poetry opposite ("*gegenüber*") that last stage in order to show that we are not there, but that we can only **not** be there by confronting that stage. In his later works, Celan moved away from such direct description to an increasingly encoded poetry, where the dislocations of idiom, syntax, and word still recall what Nelly Sachs called the "mutilated music" of survivors and where the war and Holocaust function as what Stephen Brockmann has called a "felt absence."

In the same year as "Fugue of Death," Ingeborg Bachmann picked up the same motif of music and death, but now it is not allegorical Death or its Nazi minion that starts the music. The pattern is reversed: "Like Orpheus I play/ Death on the strings of Life/ and into the beauty of the earth/ and of your eyes that rule the skies/ I know only to utter obscurities" ("*Dunkles zu sagen*").¹⁹ Now, by resonating with death and mourning, poetry has won back fully, without direct description, the "strings of life" and can summon beauty that mourns and redeems death. The beauty of such poetry is not simple, celebratory, or triumphant, but rather elliptical, difficult and obscure.

In his landmark 1956 work *The Structure of Modern Poetry*, Hugo Friedrich introduced the term "obscure poetry" (*dunkle Lyrik*) for the Modernist tradition of "difficult" verse.²⁰ In line with the common

misunderstanding of Adorno's remark, both "obscure poetry" and its criticism have appeared as so much 1950s Restoration Era obscurantism and formalism; now, with a new understanding of Adorno, we should also understand such "formalism" anew. So-called darkly "obscure poetry" (Like Orpheus I play/ Death on the strings of life/.../ I know only to utter obscurities) embodies Adorno's "paradoxical beginning." All good poetry carries at its core, in its depth, an obscurity, a "felt absence," a paradox, a Zero Hour of continuity with tradition and yet also of disruption. It contains beauty and horror (as in Bachmann's poem "Storm of Roses"), insight and reflection, with philosophical, existential profundity *and* socio-critical pointedness. To get to that core, however, requires a formalist reading with respect for the "autonomy" of the work, which, in turn, paradoxically, uncovers and activates the work's socio-critical potential.

In Adorno's last work, the unfinished *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), he developed his central ideas on art in different contexts with varied reiterations that lend that work, as always, its own formal density. Here Adorno gives his most general but most elaborately detailed defense of the critical function of form in art:

Form converges with critique. Form is that in a work of art by which it establishes itself as critical in and of itself. ...The campaign against formalism ignores [the fact] that the form which cuts against content is itself sedimented content. ...Hermetic constructs exercise more criticism of existing conditions than those that strive for formal harmony [conciliation, consonance] on behalf of [overt and explicit] social criticism and tacitly acknowledge the ubiquitously thriving operation of communications. (216-218)

Adorno's notion of the original work of art describes the oxymoron of a paradoxically engaged autonomy, whereby the rigors of formal completion (with its implied awareness of tradition) concentrate the work inward upon its own material (i.e. the respective language of the work) and the subjectivity of the individual. The degree to which the work of art is worked through in terms of its own formal completion, however dissonant, is also the degree of that work's distance from external conditions ("vom bloß Seienden" 213) and its measure of social critique. That work at formal realization in the historically given medium, its language, achieves both the "sedimentation" of spontaneous subjectivity in the work and brings about the reversal of subject into object

(“*der Umschlag des Besonderen ins Allgemeine*”) (269) representing historical relations beyond the empirical subject (“*in sich hineingehen, um über sich hinauszugehen*”) (386). The work of art becomes what Terry Eagleton calls a “contradiction incarnate” (352).²¹

That duality, however, could also lead to an equivocation; both aspects of this intrinsic dialectic invite facile reduction:

The state of combat on two fronts [*Doppelschlächtigkeit*] of the artworks as autonomous constructs and social phenomena allows rather easily for the criteria to oscillate: autonomous works provoke the verdict of social indifference, ultimately of being criminally reactionary; conversely, such works that judge social issues explicitly and one-sidedly thereby negate the artistic dimension and with it, themselves. Immanent criticism would break down this opposition. (AT368)

Formalist criticism reveals the dialectic within the work of art by entering into the intricacies of its formal realization and the depth of both its subjective and socio-historical content; the critic examines the historical form of the object and enters into its “rich obscurity” [*das fruchtbare Dunkel*] (425) in order to discover the dialectical relations of the subject to history as mediated through the material of the work of art. In the language of poetry after Auschwitz the substance of history figures as silence. Just as Adorno’s earlier essay concluded by introducing his dialectical “dictum” on the poem, so too his *Aesthetic Theory* closes with the evocation of “hermetic” poetry and the work of Paul Celan, whose “poems want to utter the most extreme horror [*das äußerste Entsetzen*] through silence” (477). As poetic embodiments of “mimetic” silences in language, Celan’s work does not run the same risk of Adorno’s conceptual language in philosophy (“Yet even the most extreme consciousness [*äußerste Bewußtsein*] of calamity threatens to degenerate into empty chatter”). Yet both labor, as form in language, against their respective materials, of mimesis in poetry and concept in philosophy, in order to define a space in history to register and redeem the suffering of the subject.

German reunification poses another “paradoxical beginning” for poetry. Just as after World War II and the Holocaust, poetry has, now under different conditions, to preserve, not surrender, its inherent paradox of autonomy and critique in order to absorb and reflect deeply, not superficially, upon those events. Now that the breach between the two Germanies, symbolized by the

Berlin Wall, has been eliminated, it seems timely to recall another remark by Adorno from his 1957 essay on “Poetry and Society,” that poetry “the more pure [and obscure] it appears, the more it contains the breach in itself” (53). Poetry can never be reunified, but only integrated around its paradox of independent form within society, its breach, where it discloses a free space for the historical subject, not to escape, but to enter into its own historicity and thereby to counteract reification, whether it be the *Gleichschaltung* of National Socialism, or the sort of contemporary *Gleich[ein]schaltung* of televisions and computers that deliver the subject into a vast network of “infomercialization,” an Internet of informed conformity.²² Now, after German reunification, Adorno’s definition of poetry’s inherent formal and dialectical disunity, its paradoxical sanctum of internal dissonance, might acquire renewed urgency. Perhaps lyric poetry will emerge again as the site of contestation and critical contemplation in the private sphere, set against the loss of memory and identity in a “universe of simulation”²³ or worse, a society of real barbarism.

ENDNOTES

¹. Theodor W. Adorno, “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft,” in *Prismen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1955), pp. 7-31; 31. Page numbers in italics refer to the German edition; other page numbers refer to the English translation (however modified). Where page numbers are absent, translations are my own. I would like to thank Elliot Jurist and Russ Harrison for their constructive comments on this essay.

². In recent years, this quotation has been subject to numerous attempts to explain its significance and pursue its implications, though I have seen no close reading of the passage in question. These diverse attempts have now given rise to a useful handbook, *Lyrik nach Auschwitz?: Adorno und die Dichter*, ed. Petra Kiedaisch (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995), whose introduction provides an overview of the principal perspectives on Adorno’s comment. In English, R. K. Meiners’ essay, “Mourning for Ourselves and for Poetry: The Lyric after Auschwitz,” in *The Centennial Review* 35/3 (1991), pp. 545-590, offers an informed, but “incomplete and probably idiosyncratic” (553) meditation, but he does approach the issues with the centrality of poetry for Adorno in mind.

³. Over the years, Adorno’s position in that statement has also at times received, to my understanding, a correct interpretation, as in, for example, the opening section (1-30) of Lawrence L. Langer’s *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975). Langer articulates the correct sense of the passage (“But Adorno never intended it to be taken literally, as his own elaborations of the principle demonstrate” [1]), though he does not offer the sort of detailed explication of the passage that I try to

provide in my reading in order to make the same point more binding. More recently, Ralf Schnell, in his *Geschichte der deutschsprachigen Literatur seit 1945* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1993), states the case with due bluntness: “Dieses Wort ist seither vielfach mißverstanden worden: als generelle Absage an die Möglichkeiten von Lyrik ‘nach Auschwitz’ nämlich” (248). The fact that the general reception and circulation of the remark, despite some such accurate readings, still adheres (perversely, as it were) to a reductive misreading would seem to indicate that Adorno’s remark functions, out of context and against better knowledge, as a necessary foil for the examination and articulation of the problem it addresses. In other words, its misreading has gained an heuristic value independent of its real meaning.

4. In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), Terry Eagleton gives an excellent general description of Adorno’s style, which would apply particularly to the passage in question: “Every sentence of his texts is thus forced to work overtime; each phrase must become a little masterpiece or miracle of dialectics. ...this style is a constellatory one, each sentence a kind of crystallized conundrum from which the next is strictly non-deducible” (342).

5. See Martin Jay’s discussion of this passage (43-44) in *Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984). Perhaps this element of exaggeration is what R. K. Meiners alludes to when he wittily remarks that Adorno “raised presumption to the level of dialectical necessity” (546). See also Klaus Laermann’s comment on “Adornos Verfahren, die Wahrheit aus Übertreibungen zu gewinnen” (12) in his “Überlegungen zu einem Darstellungsverbot” in Manuel Köppen, *Kunst und Literatur nach Auschwitz* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1993), pp. 11-15.

6. In his profound *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1992), J. M. Bernstein argues this general point about the rhetorical qualities of these philosophers: “Aesthetic modernism in philosophy is not only *about* art’s alienation from and critique of modernity, but equally *is* that alienation and critique; it is the attempt by philosophy to liken itself to an aesthetic object in order that it can both discursively analyze the fate of art and truth while simultaneously being works to be judged (the way poems are judged).” (9) Eagleton (341-342) also highlights the “independent” function of “style” in Adorno’s work.

7. In his lecture, *Schreiben nach Auschwitz: Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesung* (Frankfurt: Luchterhand, 1990), Günter Grass looks back at the reception of Adorno’s remark: “doch wurde dieser neue kategorische Imperativ prompt als Verbotstafel mißverstanden. ...Bevor man sich Zeit nahm, Adornos herausgepfückte Zuspitzungen im Umfeld ihrer vor- und nachgestellten Reflexionen zu entdecken, sie also nicht als Verbot, sondern als Maßstab zu begreifen, stand ausgesprochen wie unausgesprochen die Abwehr festgefügt” (14). He summarizes his own reaction, which was shared by other writers of the period, that Adorno’s (misunderstood) remark “nur schreibend zu widerlegen war” (18). In other words, Adorno’s comment did in fact function for artists like Grass,

Enzensberger, Rühmkorf, Bachmann, etc. as a negative manifesto, not proclaiming an aesthetic program, but rather imposing a stark standard, challenging them and admonishing them as artists not to ignore or forget the burden of their recent German history. Adorno, of course, would have enjoyed the irony and dialectical torque of his misunderstood remark's positively galvanizing effect, which coincides with his own convictions.

⁸. Adorno notes pointedly in his *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970) that "Naturlyrik ist anachronistisch nicht bloß vom Stoff her: ihr Wahrheitsgehalt ist geschwunden" (325). By extension, he refers also to any form of complacent self-identity: Fascism and the Holocaust would figure as the most extreme (and converging) forms of self-identity in atavistic barbarism and domineering technological rationality.

⁹. Theodor W. Adorno, "Engagement" in *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 409-430.

¹⁰. In *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973) Adorno notes that "It lies in the definition of negative dialectics that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total. This is the form of its hope" (406). For the German edition, see Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966). For Adorno, the poem embodies that negative dialectic even more immediately than the philosophy that gives it conceptual definition (and the book that bears the title).

¹¹. Theodor W. Adorno, "Rede zur Lyrik und Gesellschaft" in *Noten zur Literatur*, pp. 49-68.

¹². Or as stated in his *Ästhetische Theorie*: "Die Arbeit am Kunstwerk ist gesellschaftlich durchs Individuum hindurch, ohne daß es dabei der Gesellschaft sich bewußt sein müßte; vielleicht desto mehr, je weniger es das ist" (250). As always, his definitions of this relation point toward his understanding of poetry.

¹³. "Jene zwanziger Jahre," in *Lyrik nach Auschwitz*, 49-53. For example: "Dem Aspekt der Paradoxie in jeglicher Kunst selber kann keiner mehr ausweichen" (50).

¹⁴. *Widerspiel: Deutsche Lyrik seit 1945*, ed. Hans Bender (Munich: Hanser, 1962), p. 9. Cited in Helmut Korte, *Geschichte der deutschen Lyrik seit 1945* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1989), p. 2.

¹⁵. See Korte, pp. 17-29 and also Heinrich Vormweg, "Deutsche Literatur 1945-1960: Keine Stunde Null," in Manfred Durzak, *Deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur: Ausgangspositionen und aktuelle Entwicklungen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981), pp. 14-31.

- ¹⁶. Peter Demetz, *After the Fires: Recent Writing in the Germanies, Austria and Switzerland* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).
- ¹⁷. Nelly Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose: Gedichte* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), pp. 50-51.
- ¹⁸. Günter Eich, *Abgelegene Gehöfte* (Frankfurt: Georg Kurt Schauer, 1968), p. 41.
- ¹⁹. Ingeborg Bachmann, *Werke*, ed. Christine Koschel, et al. (Munich: Piper, 1978), p. 32.
- ²⁰. Hugo Friedrich, *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik: Von der Mitte des neunzehnten bis zur Mitte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1956). Friedrich, a scholar of Romance languages and literatures, introduces the term “obscurity” (*Dunkelheit*) on the first page and develops it in readings of mainly French and Spanish poets; recently, Bernd Witte has reintroduced the term for discussions of post-World War II German poetry in his essay “Von der Trümmerlyrik zur Neuen Subjektivität: Tendenzen der deutschen Nachkriegsliteratur am Beispiel der Lyrik” in Breuer, Dieter, *Deutsche Lyrik nach 1945* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), pp. 10-42. Though he does not cite Adorno, Witte defines “dunkle Lyrik” (24) in line with what I have tried to delineate as Adorno’s paradox of autonomy and social criticism: “Die dunkle Lyrik ist, wenn man sie richtig versteht, durchaus politisch; und die engagierte Lyrik da, wo sie einen literarischen Anspruch stellt, durchaus dunkel. Beide eröffnen sie dem Subjekt einen Denkraum, in dem dieses sich seine Welt und damit zugleich das eigene Ich erschafft” (36).
- ²¹. Eagleton also defines the “implicit critique” in the work of art: “it is this internal slippage or hiatus within the art work, this impossibility of ever coinciding exactly with itself, which provides the very source of its critical power, in a world where objects lie petrified in their monotonously self-same being, doomed to a hell of being no more than themselves” (349).
- ²². For a provocative and eloquent confrontation with this situation from the point of view of a poet, see Gerhard Falkner’s *Über den Unwert des Gedichts: Fragmente und Reflexionen* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1993).
- ²³. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995). According to Huyssen, museums serve to “recover a mode of contemplation outside the universe of simulation and fast-speed information” (7) and as a locus for the “contestation of the informational hyperspace” (9).

**“WHERE WERE YOU 1933-1945?”
THE LEGACY OF THE NAZI PAST BEYOND THE ZERO
HOUR**

Sabine von Dirke¹

I. INTRODUCTION

As Stephen Brockmann’s discussion in this volume shows, the terms “*Stunde Null*” (Zero Hour) and “*Nullpunkt*” (Zero Point) served from the very beginning as free-floating signifiers rich in meaning. Today, the controversial nature of these signifiers is more apparent than ever before. Referring to 1945 as the Zero Hour raises suspicions because this date and term are closely entwined with the issue of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—Germany’s coming to terms with the Third Reich and the Holocaust. Since the 1960s, the definition of the Zero Hour as a radical break with Nazism, from which a renewed and pristine German political and social culture arose, has been called into question if not rejected as a myth by many. However, the concept of the Zero Hour merits closer inspection, since it has experienced a resurrection in the recent debates surrounding German unification.

My discussion of the concept of the Zero Hour is guided by the following questions. First, what is the significance of the term Zero Hour for postwar German intellectual discourse? I restrict my discussion to the pre-unification Federal Republic, since West Germany experienced more frictions and generational confrontation regarding its Nazi past than the former East Germany, which officially proclaimed itself to be the “other,” anti-fascist Germany. Second, if we refuse to conceptualize 1945 as a total break with all preceding traditions, where can we locate a caesura which promoted the transformation of West German society into today’s stable democracy? Finally, we will need to ask whether a generational model aids in understanding the cultural upheavals and controversies of the postwar period.

Since both terms—myth and generation—carry a wide range of meanings in everyday speech, it is necessary clearly to define them as analytic categories. I am using the category of generation in Karl Mannheim’s sense, i.e. not as a biological, but as a social phenomenon. Mannheim defines a “generation as an actuality...constituted when similarly ‘located’ contemporaries participate in a common destiny and in the ideas and concepts which are in some way

bound up with its unfolding.”² Within a generation Mannheim distinguishes several generational units which are “characterized by the fact that they do not merely involve a loose participation by a number of individuals in a pattern of events shared by all alike though interpreted by the different individuals differently, but an identity of responses, a certain affinity in the way in which all move with and are formed by their common experiences.”³ In our case, the term **generation of the 1960s** encompasses a broad range of ages: on the one hand those authors and intellectuals who were born before the Second World War, and on the other hand those of the student movement who were born during or by the end of the war.

The terms Zero Hour and Zero Point enjoy great popularity even today in spite of the fact that they have been under attack as a myth for quite some time. Linguistically speaking, it is precisely the mythic dimension of this notion that accounts for its continuing appeal. As Roland Barthes⁴ has demonstrated, modern myth always utilizes already existing speech, and this applies to the myth of the Zero Hour as well. As Brockmann has made clear, the term Zero Hour was not coined by a German intellectual or artist, but was widely disseminated by Roberto Rossellini’s cinematic portrayal of life in the ruins of Berlin—literally and metaphorically speaking—in 1945/1946. Honored with the Prize of Excellence at the film festival in Locarno in 1948, this film was entitled *Germania, Anno Zero* (Germany Year Zero). The film took a rather sympathetic view of the younger generation of Germans, i.e. those who were in their teens or early twenties by the end of the war. It is therefore not surprising that this idea of the year 1945 as a Zero Hour was quickly embraced. Hence the concept of the Zero Hour or the Zero Point cannot be perceived as an imposition on postwar German culture from the outside. Rather, a catchphrase was served to Germany on a silver platter as it were, only to be transformed into a socio-psychologically necessary historical myth. As Frank Trommler has argued, it was necessary particularly for intellectual and aesthetic discourse. The notion of the Zero Hour became the conceptual working hypothesis for a country that found it impossible to site its cultural reconstruction in the past.⁵ The myth of the Zero Hour was appealing because it did not obliterate the issue of the end of the Nazi regime. Instead, like mythic speech in general, the myth of the Zero Hour constantly talks about it, but in such a manner that it drains the issue of its historicity and turns historical reality into a “Second Nature.” The result of mythic speech is therefore “a perceptible

absence”⁶ or a “vacuum,” as Brockmann has described the notion of the Zero Hour. The battle over the meaning of this term, or, more specifically, with whose memories this vacuum was to be filled, represented perhaps the most lasting predicament of postwar German politics and culture.

One scene in the opening sequence of Michael Verhoeven’s 1989 film *The Nasty Girl* captures this predicament of the discursive reconstruction of the Nazi past, which is always threatened by attempts to erase or gloss over this memory by invoking, for instance, the myth of the Zero Hour. Accompanied by emphatic organ music, the camera moves from the tower of a typical Bavarian Baroque church to its foundations and then zooms in on graffiti on the sparkling white church wall. The message reads: “Where were you all between 1939-1945? Where are you now?”⁷ Two workmen approach the wall and start to erase the graffiti as the title of the film is superimposed. Verhoeven’s film thus raises the most troubling generational question that has been asked in the postwar Federal Republic connecting the past with the present.

My analysis focuses on the period which Verhoeven’s film portrays as being oblivious to the question of the Nazi past—the 1960s to the early 1980s. However, I do not wish to look at this period from the perspective of the protagonist, who must have been born between 1958 and 1960, but from the perspective of the previous generation, i.e. the generation of 1968, which is absent from Verhoeven’s film.⁸ It is my contention that an analysis of the term Zero Hour cannot leap over the 1960s and 1970s for several reasons. The 1960s represent the caesura, which helps explain the transformation of the Federal Republic into a democratic society. The dominant myth of the 1945 Zero Hour as a total break with the Nazi past and the resulting collective amnesia resulting from that myth account for the rigor with which the generation of 1968 attacked their elders, who had rebuilt the country economically and institutionally. The destruction of the myth of the Zero Hour during the student movement led in turn to a new mythology of the continuity of Nazism in post-1945 West Germany. The generation of the Sixties occupied a pivotal position which is evidenced by today’s harsh attacks on its ideals and its heritage. The so-called “generation of 1989” today pitted against the “oldtimers” of the Sixties, did not escape and cannot deny the influence of the preceding generation. On their long march through the institutions, the generation of 1968 became the teachers of the generation of 1989, not only in school, but

also because of the prominent position which this earlier generation came to occupy in the West German *Kulturbetrieb* (cultural apparatus) throughout the 1970s. Finally, the new mythology of the Federal Republic as the immediate and unmediated successor of Nazism played a decisive role in RAF terrorism in the 1970s⁹—the formative period for the political socialization of the generation of 1989. The following analysis therefore attempts to map the legacy of the ill-fated notion of the Zero Hour in two steps. It will first be necessary to examine the perception of the Federal Republic held by the generation of 1968, especially the student movement and in the ideology of the RAF. Second, I will examine the function of the Zero Point rhetoric in the context of German unification 1989/90.

II. FROM THE MYTH OF THE ZERO HOUR TO THE MYTH OF POSTWAR WEST GERMAN FASCISM

Questioning the myth of the Zero Hour did not come as a mystical revelation to the generation of 1968. The historical and discursive context of the student movement was conducive to scrutinizing the legacy of the Nazi past beyond 1945. The Eichmann Trial in 1961, the Auschwitz Trials in Frankfurt from 1963-1965 and the trial of the SS-General Karl Wolff made it impossible to escape the question: “Where were you from 1933 to 1945?” Ulrike Meinhof’s commentary on the Wolff trial in the journal *Konkret* illustrates the generation of 1968’s moral indignation and frustration about the double standards of the West German state and society they inherited from their elders. Meinhof concludes her observations of the Wolff trial with a voice of resignation because it appears that the old guard responsible for Nazism still calls the shots:

The course of the trial is determined by the defendant, not by the court; the education about National Socialism is provided by its followers, not by its opponents. I hear the young people in the audience ask themselves whether there wasn’t something to National Socialism after all.¹⁰

This frustration and despair was manifested when Beate Klarsfeld publicly slapped the chancellor of the Grand Coalition, Kurt Georg Kiesinger, in November of 1968. In the eyes of Klarsfeld and her generation, Kiesinger, who had joined the NSDAP as early as May 1933 and worked for a cultural

unit of the Foreign Service in charge of promoting the politics of the Third Reich abroad, symbolized the continuation of Nazism into the present. We also must remember the fact that the radical right-wing NPD political party entered seven state legislatures and barely failed to get into the *Bundestag* in the 1969 federal elections. SPD votes helped pass the Emergency Laws in the face of the ardent opposition of the critical intelligentsia, the student movement, and large parts of the population, which viewed these laws as too reminiscent of the ill-fated Section 48 of the Weimar constitution—the legal inroad for Hitler’s smooth *Gleichschaltungspolitik* (alignment politics).

These spectacular events are, however, only part of the picture. In many ways, the literary labor of Heinrich Böll, Günter Grass and others anticipated the student movement’s radical attack on the collective amnesia about the Nazi period and the Holocaust. One play in particular merits mentioning in this context. Rolf Hochhuth’s *The Deputy* premiered in February 1963 and ignited one of the first broad debates about the Holocaust. Texts by Hochhuth, Böll, and Grass stood in striking contrast to the literary canon preserved in West German schools and universities at that time. Aside from the “classics” of German literature, the high school curriculum for German literature classes was comprised mainly of authors from the “inner emigration,” such as Werner Bergengruen, Hans Carossa, and Ernst Wiechert, as well as texts by Ernst Jünger and some *völkisch* writers. Neither “exile literature” nor most of the literary works burned in May of 1933 returned to the classrooms in the 1950s, when the generation of 1968 attended school. Both the literary modernity dominant during the Weimar Republic and contemporary literature were mainly absent from the high school curriculum.¹¹ Finally, we should not forget the growing influence of the Frankfurt School’s Critical Theory on West German culture during the 1960s. The public radio station in Hesse, for instance, broadcast talks by and discussions with Theodor W. Adorno from 1959-1969, all of which dealt with raising a new generation of Germans after Auschwitz. Among them was the famous essay “*Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*” (What does it mean: coming to terms with the past), broadcast in February of 1960.¹²

Recognizing that their elders were among the people who elected Hitler and committed the Holocaust was a formative experience for the generation of 1968. The older generation’s silence about the “most recent past”—the euphemistic term for the twelve years of Nazism—fostered the growing

estrangement of this younger generation from the older one as well as from the Federal Republic itself. The young generation's perplexity and moral indignation about this amnesia still comes through in their many statements, retrospective accounts and aesthetic articulations. In the words of the late director Rainer Werner Fassbinder, a major representative of the generation of the student movement:

When I see the fuss being made over *Holocaust* [the Hollywood mini-series], I wonder why they have to make such a fuss; have they really repressed and forgotten all of that? They can't have forgotten it; they must have had it on their minds when they were creating their new state. If a thing of so much significance could be forgotten or repressed, then something must be pretty wrong with this democracy and this "German Model."¹³

Consequently, this generation filled the perceptible absence signified by the term Zero Hour with their own historical narrative linking the Nazi period directly to the present. The generation of 1968 read the entire postwar history of the Federal Republic exclusively through the lens of 1945. They perceived it not as a break but as a continuation of Nazism, or fascism, the term they preferred. Both the socio-psychological argument and the focus on state power provided the connection which linked postwar West German democracy to Nazism. One of Hans Jürgen Krahl's speeches represents a good example for the latter approach. Krahl did not view the Federal Republic as a democracy, but claimed that the West German state was willing "to turn itself into a fascist leader."¹⁴ The article "*Vom Antisemitismus zum Antikommunismus*" (From Anti-Semitism to Anti-Communism) by Rudi Dutschke, another leading activist and theorist of the student movement, exemplifies the socio-psychological approach. Based on social-psychological studies by Erich Fromm, Theodor W. Adorno, and others on the authoritarian personality they believed to be indispensable for the rise and support of fascism,¹⁵ Dutschke argues that these authoritarian personality structures survived the external defeat of fascism in Germany and allowed for the transformation of Nazi anti-Semitism into the anti-communism of the Cold War.¹⁶

The former lawyer of many student activists and later RAF terrorist Horst Mahler made the same point in an interview, drawing a direct line from 1945 to 1967:

Only the political power of German fascism was broken in 1945; its ideological power only in parts, but there was no anti-fascist revolution in Germany. The latter was made up for in 1967, during the student revolt, when we truly became aware of the fact of what fascism means, particularly that the social conditions for fascism continued in the Federal Republic, but also in other countries, especially in the USA.¹⁷

Later on in the interview, Mahler refers as well to the moral indignation about Nazism and the Nazi state's politics of genocide. Referring to politicians such as Alfred Dregger (CDU) and Franz Josef Strauß (CSU), who in his opinion still justified Nazism by defending contemporary fascist regimes like Chile, Mahler reinforced his claim that fascism was not a concept or reality belonging solely to the past.¹⁸

Mahler adds another significant date to the thesis of Nazi continuity: the German Autumn of 1977. In September and October of 1977, RAF terrorism culminated in the kidnapping and murder of Hanns-Martin Schleyer, the hijacking of a Lufthansa flight, and the deaths of three RAF members—Gudrun Ensslin, Andreas Baader and Jan Carl Raspe—in the maximum security prison in Stuttgart-Stammheim. The ideology of the RAF, the symbolism of individual terrorist actions, and the discourse about terrorism all intimately connect terrorism to the Nazi past. On the ideological level, the RAF argued that the Federal Republic was subject to an ongoing process of *Faschisierung*, i.e. of rendering the state and society more and more fascist. The RAF perceived the Social Democrats at the root of this problem and denounced the SPD government as a mode of *Sozialfaschismus* (social fascism). For the RAF, the postwar West German state was just as fascist as the Hitler regime had been; the terrorist violence was intended to reveal the “fascist face” of the State.¹⁹

Hanns-Martin Schleyer was chosen as a victim because of his symbolic value for the continuity thesis. When Schleyer was kidnapped, he was head of the two most powerful employers' organizations in West Germany and therefore had a very high public profile. But he also could not escape the question: Where were you from 1933 to 1945? As an SS-Officer, he had

supervised the integration of industries in the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia into the war machinery of the Third Reich. After the war, he quickly returned to the upper echelons of the industrial and economic elite, and began working for Daimler-Benz in 1951. His fair but hard-nosed approach in negotiations with labor unions and his opposition to the codetermination legislation passed by the SPD/FDP coalition government in the 1970s made him look like the embodiment of the fascist capitalism which the RAF maintained reigned in the FRG.

Although the West German Left distanced itself vigorously from the terrorist violence of the RAF, the thesis that there had been no break with Nazism in 1945 had not lost its luster by the 1970s. The state's response to RAF terrorism was widely viewed as yet further substantiation of the continuity thesis. The 1977/78 film *Germany in Autumn*, a coproduction of several well-known West German directors and authors, represents perhaps the most informative document in this regard.²⁰ Most of the contributors belonged to the generation of the 1960s, and since the film was a cooperative effort, it is a representative expression of the perception of the Federal Republic by left-liberal intellectuals during this time period. The tone of comparison is set right at the beginning, when a quote ascribed to a "Mrs. Wilde, five children" and dated April 9, 1945 appears on the screen: "After reaching a certain level of cruelty, it doesn't matter who started it: it should only stop." Alexander Kluge's contribution to *Germany in Autumn* also invites the viewer to make comparisons and connections between historical footage and the current situation. Kluge introduces a history teacher, Gabi Teichert, who has doubts about teaching German history and also experiences problems with her superiors, who criticize her attempts at historical contextualization.

The thrust of the comparison focuses on the relationship between state and individual in German history. Lengthy film sequences juxtapose scenes from the state memorial service for Hanns-Martin Schleyer with footage from the state funeral of General Erwin Rommel, the head of the Wehrmacht's troops in Africa during World War II, who had committed suicide. The voiceover accompanying the scenes of the hearse rolling through downtown Stuttgart, where it was greeted by the crowd's Hitler salute, states: "General Erwin Rommel, the hero of Africa... Killed with poison by the state in the autumn of 1944. Then, state funeral." The message is clear: today's state still sacrifices individuals just as the Nazi regime did in the past. The film concludes with

scenes from the funeral of the three dead RAF terrorists. These last images are dominated by uniforms which closely resemble the images from Rommel's funeral. The many police uniforms ensure that the state's presence features prominently in this cinematic conclusion. The effect subliminally suggests that the Federal Republic is a police state—the contemporary equivalent of a fascist regime.

There is no doubt that the government's response to RAF terrorism merits criticism for infringing on civil liberties. The fact that several of the hastily drafted anti-terrorism laws were later repealed by courts as unconstitutional does much to validate this criticism. But was the continuity thesis put forth by the generation of 1968 an adequate counter-argument to their parents' and grandparents' attempt to escape the question of their own responsibility? Doesn't the generation of 1968 have to face up to the criticism that they tried to fight one myth with another one?

One of the leading figures of the student movement, Peter Schneider, did raise this issue, albeit twenty years later and within the context of the Historians' Debate.²¹ His evaluation of the student movement's attempts to come to terms with the past is largely negative. In retrospect, Schneider agrees with criticism often raised against the student movement, especially regarding the latter's inflationary use of the term fascism. The writer criticizes the student movement's reductive explanation of Nazism as a result of capitalism only, as well as the faulty equation of fascism with the democratic system in the Federal Republic. However, unlike most other critics of the student movement, Schneider does not stop here. Instead, he examines his generation's motivation for this short-circuiting of past and present. Schneider presents a convincing social-psychological explanation, arguing that the antifascism of the student movement was driven by an unconscious desire to ease the burden of the Holocaust. Interpreting Nazism as the historical outgrowth of capitalism within the framework of a Marxist-Leninist model of fascism fulfilled this function, since it allowed for at least a partial exoneration of their parents' generation. Schneider self-critically concludes: "This historical lie spared us the confrontation with the respective concrete and personal guilt of our fathers and therefore with our implication as their sons and daughters."²²

In spite of all these problems, this attempt to come to terms with the Nazi past was instrumental in West Germany's successful transformation into a democratic society. While multiple institutional and political restorations of

German democratic traditions had already taken place,²³ the generation of 1968 contributed in a different but very important way to the liberalization of West German society and the anchoring of democratic structures within it. Hence it in many ways represents a break with the cultural heritage of Nazism. The generation of 1968 replaced a “culture of obedience” with a culture of “opposition and resistance,” which Adorno had advocated on public radio in the 1960s.²⁴

III. 1968 MEETS 1989

This view of the Federal Republic, which no longer anxiously clings to 1945 as the Zero Hour, but rather defines West Germany as a democratic culture of criticism in the universalist tradition of the Enlightenment, has been challenged since the early 1980s by attempts to restore pre-1933 conservative thought. Unification provided an opening for using the Zero Point thesis once again, this time to inscribe yet another agenda more prominently into public life and discourse. The German-German literary debate,²⁵ the dispute over the German Left’s inability to come to terms with unification, and later the broader discussion about the status and function of the European Left after the demise of existing socialism all represent instances of an ongoing struggle to redefine the political and discursive landscape of Germany.²⁶ In my discussion, I will concentrate only on one small subtext of these larger debates, namely the resurrection of the myth of the Zero Hour and the attack on the 1960s generation, i.e. the literary intelligentsia and the student movement.

One of the major players in this debate, Frank Schirrmacher, uses the terms Zero Hour and Zero Point with reference to both 1945 and 1990. His article “Abschied von der Literatur der Bundesrepublik,” (Farewell to the Literature of the Federal Republic)²⁷ critically refers to the Zero Hour as a self-imposed caesura. Since post-1945 literature was obsessed with its role as the collective conscience of the Federal Republic, it developed as if without awareness of its pre-1933 roots and traditions. In his scathing review of Christa Wolf’s book *Was bleibt* (What remains),²⁸ Schirrmacher turns the tables on the student movement by using one of their most cherished terms—anti-authoritarian personality—and applies it to Wolf, calling her life “*Auch eine Studie über den autoritären Charakter*” (Also a Study of the Authoritarian Personality).²⁹ In “Hetze? Die zweite Stunde Null” (Instigation?

The Second Zero Hour)³⁰ which refers to the collapse of existing socialism in East Germany, Schirmacher accuses those intellectuals who persistently reminded West German society of its “totalitarian heritage” of a double standard. Now, he maintains, these very same voices want to implement a second Zero Hour in the sense of drawing a line to avoid discussing the intellectuals’ complicity with the totalitarian GDR regime. However, Schirmacher himself uses the concept of the Zero Hour for his attempt to rewrite postwar German literary history, as we shall see later. Finally, Schirmacher’s choice of words in this article, in which he refers to Peter Schneider as a leftover of 1968 (“*ein Überlebender der 68er Generation*”) reveals his distance from the student movement and his belief that it is dead and should remain buried.

Only a few months later Brigitte Seebacher-Brandt stated the attack on 1968 more bluntly in a discussion of this generation’s negative attitude towards unification. She also coined the term “generation of 1989” in this context. Seebacher-Brandt claims that history has outwitted the generation of 1968 and its insistence both on the historical and continuing necessity of Germany’s division. Portions of her argument appear to have been personally motivated, such as her verdict that the 1968 generation turned into narcissistic hedonists who betrayed the Left’s ideal of solidarity. More interesting are those aspects of her argument in which she discusses the anti-fascism of the student movement. She writes:

Because of the anti-authoritarian and other mumbo-jumbo it has often been overlooked that the student movement first and foremost wanted to be shaped by the German past: The fathers had allegedly failed, the identification with the Federal Republic established by these very fathers obviously cannot be allowed, and opposition had to be made up for.

She concludes that the heritage of 1968 will not be carried on. “It has sunk, and the view is open onto the generation that has been shaped by 1989 and 1990.”³¹

With all due respect for the valid criticism of the 1968 generation in particular and of the entire German Left in general, stylizing the sincere, even if “faulty” attempt to comprehend the Nazi past simply as a malicious and willful provocation, represents a reductive reading of the complex motivation for the student movement’s antifascism. Seebacher-Brandt’s philippic resembles

Schirmmacher's attempt to define 1990 as the new and true Zero Hour for German literature and culture, and the parallels are indeed striking. However, the significance of this Zero Point rhetoric lies in its function as a new foundational myth for a unified Germany quite analogous to the function the term Zero Hour had for 1945. As previously discussed, mythic speech empties an issue or event of its historicity. 1989/90 may thus appear as the natural beginning of a new era independent of connections to the previous period. In this case too, the fact that the term Zero Hour was already a part of public discourse made it even more attractive for mythic reworking.

Yet invoking the myth is no longer sufficient because of the controversial nature of the two terms Zero Hour and Zero Point. Both Seebacher-Brandt and Schirmmacher therefore supplement their own Zero Point myth with narratives which reduce the generation of the Sixties to its most dogmatic articulation. The criticism Andreas Huyssen³² leveled against Schirmmacher for conflating the historically necessary opposition against Adenauer's restoration politics by West German intellectuals with the later petrified version of a "know-it-all" dogmatism holds true with respect to Seebacher-Brandt's attack on the student movement as well. Cora Stephan criticizes this false representation of 1968 in the narratives of the generation of 1989. She points out that debates about various manifestations of totalitarianism had been articulated within the left long before the fall of the Wall. Stephan therefore accuses Seebacher-Brandt and her allies of a wholesale attack on the generation of 1968 that fails to differentiate the good from the bad:

Whoever speaks of "the Left" and binds it to one single model overlooks the talent and inclination toward self-education that the milieu of the undogmatic Frankfurt scene has cultivated for the past twenty years. These sixty-eighters are certainly not responsible for the *Stamokap* faction of the SPD, the closeness to the principles of the SED (Seebacher-Brandt), and also not for the Tuscany therapy of some late hedonists in the leadership of the party.³³

The undogmatic traditions of the Frankfurt Sponti scene and the new social movements in general, which developed in the wake and as a critique of 1968 dogmatism, all share much with the literature written in opposition to the dominant paradigm of the student movement and with literary critical approaches fashionable since the late 1970s. The new social movements

introduced categories like gender and difference so significant for today's deconstructionist and postmodernist theoretical paradigms. Schirmacher, too, simply eclipses all these literary developments, such as the return of the self in women's literature and in the so-called literature of New Subjectivity, because they do not fit into his literary-historical narrative.

But what is the rationale behind these distorted versions of German socio-political and literary history, which were promptly criticized in the ensuing debate? Jochen Vogt explains the attack on the socially critical and engaged literature of the 1960s as a preventive strike, because literature in this mold could potentially create upheaval even today.³⁴ In a similar vein, Keith Bullivant argues in Böll's defense that the latter's early themes—for example, “the selling out of ideals, opportunism, the impact of materialism on social values”—“are surely germane to what happened in the new ‘*Länder*’ after economic and political unification.”³⁵ Such explanatory models have some truth, but there is more of a hidden agenda in the current attack on all that the generation of the Sixties stands for. Both critiques—Schirmacher's and Seebacher-Brandt's—circle around the issue of the Nazi past—or, more precisely of how this past became a central point for the identity of the generation of the Sixties. Hence there is much to be said for scholarly evaluations which read the German-German literary debate in the context of the Historians' Debate.³⁶ While the revisionist agenda of the Historians' Debate ignited a public outcry and was successfully rebutted, the new Zero Hour rhetoric appears to be having more success precisely because of its mythic dimension. Defining 1989/90 as the true Zero Hour drains Germany of an uncomfortable cultural heritage—a literary intellectual discourse which had forced the Nazi past back onto the FRG's public agenda.³⁷ The new Zero Hour rhetoric, if successful, will kill two birds with one stone: eliminating the 1960s from collective memory will also remove the Nazi past, which the generation of the Sixties had brought into seemingly permanent focus.

The apolitical aesthetic which Schirmacher advocates expresses a yearning for a clear separation between politics and literature, just as in the good old days before the student movement broke down this barrier with its call for operative genres such as documentary literature. Moreover, Schirmacher's position recalls the nebulous idea of “normalcy for Germany” which Chancellor Kohl articulated during the unification period. Schirmacher wishes to achieve this normalcy by redefining the German literary canon for the years 1949-

1989 from the perspective of pre-1933 European literary modernity, which represents his aesthetic yardstick. He implies that the socially aware and engaged literature of the 1960s would not measure up to the aesthetic standards of this tradition and therefore does not merit preservation. Seebacher-Brandt instead articulates her yearning for normalcy in terms of an affirmation of the German nation, with which the generation of 1968 had such obvious problems in 1989/90.

IV. CONCLUSION

Just what will remain of the 1960s' consensus of postwar West German politics and culture and what will emerge from the current debates is still hard to predict. Only one thing is clear: Both politics and generation play a role in the reshaping of the discursive landscape and the construction of a new post-unification consensus. Inevitable shifts in generation seem to enter into an uncomfortable if not to say pernicious alliance with a very deliberate political agenda.

The failure of the "oldtimers" of the Sixties lies in obliterating the new generational shifts. We need to acknowledge that the question—"Where were you between 1939 and 1945?"—is slowly but surely becoming a historical problem from the perspective of the post-68 generations. Today's generation of the thirty-somethings can direct this question almost exclusively at their grandparents. For their parents, born during the Third Reich, the question of responsibility has to be phrased differently. The parents of today's thirty-something generation were children during the Nazi regime and not able to exercise choices, though they were certainly significantly shaped by the ideological state apparatus of the Third Reich. Hence, the Nazi past becomes emotionally further removed for the generation of 1989 than for the generation of 1968, who had to face this past directly in their parents.

The literature by Böll, Grass, and others, which dominated intellectual discourse for so long, speaks in a different way to the generation of 1989 than it spoke to that of 1968. Hence I agree with Huyssen, who, while criticizing the resurrection of a Zero Point rhetoric, admits that a reconceptualization of German postwar literature and culture from the vantage point of 1989/90 is inevitable.³⁸ The Zero Point rhetoric cannot be the solution. It smacks of historical revisionism, which is a far cry from what is actually necessary—

historical contextualization of this literature and time, i.e. the 1960s. In addition, new modes of approaching the Nazi past and commemorating the Holocaust are necessary because of the above-described shift in biological generations. A dogmatic insistence on the part of the Sixties generation that later generations relate to the Holocaust through Sixties paradigms is as obsolete as the Zero Hour myth and has perhaps already contributed to the rift between the generations of 1968 and 1989.

I can only briefly allude to the political aspect, which makes the task of developing new modes of commemorating the Nazi past and its victims difficult at a time when remembrance is becoming more and more important. This generational conflict is overlapped by the political agenda of neo-conservatism.³⁹ The generation of the 1960s in general, and particularly the student movement, have been a thorn in the side of neo-conservatism, because this generation insisted on reading German history—pre-1933 and post-1945—from the perspective of the Third Reich. This understanding of history led to a rejection of the concept of the nation as obsolete, if not dangerous in the German context. As a result, the restoration of pre-1933 conservative traditions, for which the concept of the nation was central and unencumbered, was rendered difficult, if not virtually impossible. Unification opened up a new opportunity in this regard. Hence today we see more aggressive attempts to write the critical literary and cultural heritage of the generation of the Sixties out of the history of the Federal Republic with the help of a new Zero Hour myth. I am, however, cautiously optimistic that the new Zero Hour myth will not be as successful as its predecessor because of the lasting legacy of the generation of the Sixties, i.e. the development of a cultural milieu in the Federal Republic which is aware of its Nazi past and appreciative of criticism and political protest.

ENDNOTES

¹. I would like to express my thanks to the Center for German and European Studies at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. for providing me with a fellowship that allowed me to write this article.

². Karl Mannheim, “The Sociological Problem of Generations,” in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), p. 306.

³. Mannheim, p. 306.

4. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990); see in particular the last theoretical chapter entitled “Myth Today,” pp. 109-158.

5. Frank Trommler, “Auf dem Weg zu einer kleineren Literatur: Ästhetische Perioden und Probleme seit 1945,” in Thomas Koebner, ed., *Tendenzen der deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1984), p. 11.

6. Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 143.

7. Verhoeven, *The Nasty Girl* (1989): “Wo wart ihr zwischen 1939-45? Wo seid ihr jetzt?”

8. I find this absence highly problematic in a film that claims in its credits that it tells a representative story. While it goes without saying that further education about Nazism and the Holocaust are still necessary today, any claim that complete silence about the Third Reich reigned the FRG in the 1970s and 1980s, when the protagonist, Sonja, attends high school and university cannot be substantiated. I will mention here only the U.S. mini series *Holocaust*, broadcast in January 1979 on West German television, which generated a tremendous discussion about the Holocaust on all levels of society.

9. RAF stands for Red Army Faction, the main organization of left-wing terrorism, which was at its high point during the 1970s.

10. Ulrike Meinhof, “Ein Mann mit guten Manieren. Ein Tag Karl-Wolff-Prozeß,” *Konkret* 9 (1964), reprinted in *Die Würde des Menschen ist antastbar: Aufsätze und Polemiken* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1980), p. 57.

11. See Hermann Glaser, “Das Exil fand nicht statt. Schulwirklichkeit im Deutschunterricht 1945-1965,” in *10. Mai 1933. Bücherverbrennung in Deutschland und die Folgen*, ed. Ulrich Waberer (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1983). See also Hermann Glaser, *Die Kulturgeschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, v. 2 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1990), pp. 267-276.

12. These essays and discussions have been reprinted in Theodor W. Adorno, *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970). On the significance of radio for literature and culture during the 1950s and 1960s see Glaser, pp. 222-233.

13. This statement stems from a 1979 discussion of Fassbinder’s film about terrorism, *The Third Generation*; see Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *The Anarchy of the Imagination: Interviews, Essays, Notes*, ed. Michael Töteberg and Leo A. Lensing (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 38. See also Peter Roos, “Jahrgang 50: Die Erben der Apo,” *Der Spiegel* 1-2, January 7, 1980, p. 137. In his study of the generation of 1968, which is based on interviews with the leading figures of the student movement,

Tobias Mündemann concludes: “The moral indignation about the Vietnam War and about the recent past of the Federal Republic is cited over and over again as the motivation for interrupting the comfortable state of affairs and for the political protest” In: *Die 68er... und was aus ihnen geworden ist* (Munich: Heyne, 1988), p. 200.

¹⁴. Hans Jürgen Krahl, “Römerbergrede,” in *Konstitution und Klassenkampf* (Frankfurt: Neue Kritik, 1971), p. 149.

¹⁵. See particularly Theodor W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper, 1950).

¹⁶. Rudi Dutschke, “Vom Antisemitismus zum Antikommunismus,” in Uwe Bergmann et al., *Rebellion der Studenten oder Die neue Opposition* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1968), p. 58.

¹⁷. Horst Mahler’s interview is part of the film *Deutschland im Herbst* (Filmverlag der Autoren, 1977/78). By the time of the interview, Mahler had already renounced the terrorism of the RAF.

¹⁸. Neither Mahler’s radical position nor statements by Krahl, Dutschke, and other student leaders had a mass effect; see Iring Fetscher and Günter Rohrmoser, *Ideologien und Strategien* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1981), p. 188.

¹⁹. See also Fetscher and Rohrmoser, pp. 185-203.

²⁰. The following filmmakers and authors contributed: Heinrich Böll, Alf Brustellin, Hans Peter Closs, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Alexander Kluge, Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus, Maximiliane Mainka, Edgar Reitz, Katja Rupe, Volker Schlöndorff, Bernd Sinkel, Peter Schubert.

²¹. Peter Schneider, “Das Ende der Befangenheit?” in *Deutsche Ängste* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), pp. 65-81. This essay was originally published under the title “Im Todeskreis der Schuld” in *Die Zeit*, March 27, 1987, pp. 65f.

²². Schneider, “Das Ende der Befangenheit,” p. 75.

²³. Jeffrey Herf, “Multiple Restorations: German Political Traditions and the Interpretation of Nazism, 1945-1946,” *Central European History* 26.1 (January 1993), pp. 21-55.

²⁴. See Schneider, p. 72 and Adorno, p. 145.

²⁵. For this debate see: “*Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf.*” *Der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland*, ed. Thomas Anz (Munich: edition sprangenberg, 1991); *Der*

deutsch-deutsche Literaturstreit oder "Freunde, es spricht sich schlecht mit gebundener Zunge." ed. Karl Deiritz and Hannes Krauss (Hamburg: Luchterhand, 1991); and Keith Bullivant, *The Future of German Literature* (Oxford: Berg, 1994).

²⁶. These latter two debates were mainly carried out in the daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the weekly *Die Zeit*; see in particular the series "What's left?" (October 19, 1992 to April 21, 1993) and the sequel "What's right?" (April 18, 1994 to August 27, 1994). For an index of who had contributed so far, see *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* August 4, 1994, p. 23.

²⁷. Frank Schirrmacher, "Abschied von der Literatur der Bundesrepublik," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 2, 1990, Literaturbeilage.

²⁸. Christa Wolf, *Was bleibt* (Frankfurt: Luchterhand, 1990).

²⁹. Frank Schirrmacher, "Dem Druck des härteren, strengeren Lebens standhalten. Auch eine Studie über den autoritären Charakter: Christa Wolfs Aufsätze, Reden und ihre jüngste Erzählung *Was bleibt*," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 2, 1990, Literaturbeilage. Reprinted in Anz, pp. 77-89.

³⁰. Frank Schirrmacher, "Hetze? Die zweite Stunde Null," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 18, 1990, p. 31.

³¹. Brigitte Seebacher-Brandt, "Abschied von den Eltern. Zur Abwahl einer Generation," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 12, 1990.

³². Andreas Huyssen, "After the Wall: The Failure of German Intellectuals," *New German Critique* 52 (Winter 1991), pp. 109-143.

³³. Cora Stephan, "Totgesagte leben länger," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 24, 1992, p. 33.

³⁴. Jochen Vogt, "Langer Abschied von der Nachkriegsliteratur? Ein Kommentar zur letzten westdeutschen Literaturdebatte," in Deiritz and Krauss, pp. 53-68.

³⁵. Bullivant, p. 184.

³⁶. See Irene Heidelberger-Leonard, "Der Literaturstreit - ein Historikerstreit im gesamtdeutschen Kostüm?" in Deiritz and Krauss, pp. 69-77, as well as Huyssen, op. cit.

³⁷. See also Huyssen, p. 125.

³⁸. The fact that a generational shift emerged since the mid-1980s is no novel observation. Martin Lüdke made this argument already at a conference in 1988; see his

“German Literature on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: A Critic’s Perspective,” in *Literature on the Threshold: The German Novel in the 1980s*, ed. Arthur Williams et al. (New York: Berg, 1990), pp. 335-347.

³⁹. On this issue see the various essays by Jürgen Habermas now available in English in the anthology *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians’ Debate*, ed. Shierry Weber Nichol森 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

**DIVIDED MEMORY, MULTIPLE RESTORATIONS:
WEST GERMAN POLITICAL REFLECTION ON THE
NAZI PAST, 1945-1953**

Jeffrey Herf

Memory of the Nazi past divided along political lines after 1945.¹ Indeed, it is striking to note just how much memory of the crimes of the Nazi past, and of the Jewish catastrophe, divided along political lines which existed in 1933. The hopes of many that the era of the Popular Front (1935-1939) and the Anti-Hitler Coalition (1941-1945) would shape the division of postwar memory and policy as well were dashed. In place of a continuation of those brief if intense moments of professions of communist solidarity with oppressed and persecuted Jewry during the war, the Jewish question was suppressed in East Germany and came to the fore only in the Federal Republic. Commentators have often noted Konrad Adenauer's role in this emergence. Yet in some ways far more important than Adenauer were the early and persistent efforts of the democratic left and liberals in the Western occupation zones, and in the Federal Republic, to address these issues.

In the first postwar decade in both East and West Germany, German political leaders did, contrary to repeated assertions, publicly reflect on the Nazi past. These voices amidst a more widespread popular silence were not the result of the unmediated bursting forth of previously repressed memory. This psychoanalytic imagery, certainly appropriate in some contexts, has distracted our attention for too long from the guiding role played by inherited ideologies in shaping postwar understanding of the Nazi era. I have called the postwar era in the two Germanies one of **multiple restorations** to call attention to the importance of the non- and anti-Nazi political traditions of pre-1933 Germany—communism, social democracy, liberalism, and moderate conservatism—which came to dominate the post-1945 political culture of both Germanies.² To be sure, the power of the occupying powers in Germany was complete. Yet the victors did not only impose previously foreign ideas on the Germans. Rather, hegemony and power of the victors meant guarding against a revival of Nazism as well as supporting and encouraging the indigenous anti- or non-Nazi German traditions which had been suppressed and driven into exile in 1933. Following a cataclysm such as World War II, intact political traditions and meaningful interpretations of reality were precious resources to

which people tenaciously clung. They offered the lenses through which Germans tried to make sense of the Nazi era.

It is not only theoretical considerations such as Thomas Nipperdey's neo-historicist appreciation of multiple continuities, and Reinhart Koselleck's focus on the durability of political language in different settings that lead to this conclusion.³ Two other factors facilitated multiple restorations. First, because the "thousand year Reich" lasted only twelve years, the leaders of Weimar's non- and anti-Nazi parties who had not been killed were young and/or vigorous enough to reenter political life in 1945. All of the leading political figures of postwar political life in West and East Germany came of political age between 1900 and 1930. They experienced Nazism, World War II, and the Holocaust in their mature, not their young and formative years. Konrad Adenauer (1876-1967), the leader of postwar Christian Democracy, and chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1949 to 1963, had been mayor of Cologne from 1917 to 1933. Kurt Schumacher (1895-1952), the leader of postwar Social Democracy, had been a member of the *Reichstag* in the Weimar Republic. Theodor Heuss (1884-1963), the first president of the Federal Republic had been a journalist and liberal politician in the Weimar years as well. Walter Ulbricht (1893-1973), the effective head of the East German government, Otto Grotewohl (1894-1964), co-chair of the Socialist Unity Party, and Wilhelm Pieck (1876-1960), a comrade and friend of Rosa Luxembourg, and first president of the German Democratic Republic and the third leading figure of post-1945 German Communism also represented restoration of an old, German political tradition. There was no one, among the victors or the Germans, who wanted to place Germany's future in the hands of the generation that came of political age during the Nazi era.

Second, due to the possibility of emigration and political exile, hundreds of anti-Nazi political leaders were able to return to play important roles in the postwar era. For chastened liberals and moderate conservatives such as Theodor Heuss and Konrad Adenauer, "inner emigration" entailed keeping a low profile inside Nazi Germany. The communists found refuge first in Paris and Prague, then in Moscow, Mexico City, as well as in London and New York. The social democratic emigration also expanded from Paris and Prague to Stockholm, London, and New York. Exile changed some exiles more than others, but in all instances it made possible restoration of large elements of the political beliefs which were driven out of Germany in 1933. As the Nazi

persecution of the Jews intensified, the religious and ethnic composition of the anti-Nazi emigration in the West also changed. Political exiles found themselves in an unprecedented position in German history: non-Jews were a minority within an increasingly Jewish exile community. Numbers alone suggested that the Jewish tragedy would come to the fore in the western emigration.

Of all the major national political figures, it was Kurt Schumacher, leader of postwar social democracy, who called for the sharpest confrontation with the Nazi past. From the earliest moments until his death in 1953, Schumacher was the most emphatic in support of removal of persons compromised by actions during the Nazi years from positions of political responsibility, further trials for war crimes and crimes against humanity, restitution or *Wiedergutmachung* for the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, and opposition to anti-Semitism. From May 6, 1945, two days before the Nazi surrender, until his death at the age of fifty-seven on August 20, 1952, Kurt Schumacher in speech after speech urged his fellow Germans to face the Nazi past. A democratic socialist, Schumacher believed overcoming the Nazi past meant breaking with German capitalism, though not to the degree that such a break would lead to subordination to the emerging Communist dictatorship in the Soviet zone. Though indebted to Marxist analyses of Nazism, Schumacher stressed that Nazism had not only been the result of capitalist elites but had also had a base of mass support, that the Germans fought for Hitler to the bitter end, and that the Nazi regime was destroyed only as a result of Allied arms.

Nevertheless, Schumacher rejected the idea of a collective guilt of the German people. To extend guilt to the whole people repressed the memory of the anti-Nazi resistance, and helped those who had committed crimes from escaping the consequences, for if all were guilty, none were responsible. Nevertheless, many Germans did have a heavy burden in 1945,

saw with their own eyes, with what common bestiality, the Nazis tortured, robbed, and hunted the Jews. Not only did they remain silent, but they would have preferred that Germany had won the Second World War thus guaranteeing them peace and quiet and also a small profit.⁴

They had believed in dictatorship and violence, and thus were occupied by others after 1945. “This political insight,” he said was “the precondition for a

spiritual-intellectual and moral repentance and change.”⁵ For Schumacher, in particular, a new German democracy must rest on a sharp judicial, moral, and political confrontation with the Nazi era.

Schumacher’s visceral detestation of dictatorship nourished his famous anti-communism. In so doing, he spoke a language familiar to anti-communist labor leaders in the United States, such as David Dubinsky, Jay Lovestone, George Meany and William Green. Yet the Jewish question also offered a point of connection between émigré social democrats and American labor leaders. To be sure, German social democrats, from Bebel on, had argued that the struggle for democracy in Germany was inseparable from the struggle against anti-Semitism. Yet, in ways which have as yet remained insufficiently appreciated, the social democratic emigration, especially the social democratic emigration in New York City, lent powerful additional stimulus to postwar social democratic solidarity with Jewish survivors. Leading officials of the American Federation of Labor, notably Jay Lovestone and William Green, as well as David Dubinsky, President of the International Ladies Garment Worker’s Union continued wartime solidarity in the form of postwar assistance to the social democrats. The New York based Jewish Labor Committee, an umbrella organization formed in 1934 to fight Nazism and rescue Jews and political refugees, formed the key link between German social democrats and the American labor movement.⁶ In September 1947, Schumacher was the first German politician of national significance to visit the United States. He did so at the invitation of the American Federation of Labor and the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC) in New York. He spoke at the AF of L convention in San Francisco, and met with leaders of the JLC in New York, and on both occasions stressed his support for *Wiedergutmachung*.⁷ Adenauer’s prominence has obscured the decisive role played by the German social democrats, German liberals, and the American labor movement in early support for *Wiedergutmachung*. They did so primarily because their political and moral convictions suggested it was the right thing to do, but also because they gratefully remembered the efforts of the Jewish Labor Committee which led to the rescue of hundreds of anti-Nazi German political figures from Nazi-dominated Europe.

In the midst of these continuities and enduring solidarities, however, the Nazi era had wrought a rarely noted but significant change in social democratic temperament. Walter Benjamin described the Marxist evolutionary optimism for which social democracy became world famous as one whose vision of the

good society was driven more by visions of happy grandchildren than of the suffering of dead ancestors. The social democratic leadership returned from the concentration camps and foreign exile with a new and deep sense of tragedy. Ernst Reuter, the social democratic mayor of West Berlin from 1947 to 1953, articulated the new tragic sensibility on April 19, 1953, at a memorial on the tenth anniversary of the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto.⁸ He described in detail the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto, and then recalled his own memories of detention in a Nazi concentration camp.

Until the end of my life, I will never forget the scream in the night, the scream of my comrade who had been beaten to death. And because I will never forget it, I, along with all of the others who experienced these things swore the following: We must dedicate our whole life to the task of making this impossible for all time. We cannot again allow individuals and peoples, races and religious confessions to attack one another.⁹

As he had put it before, the memory of those particular moments of his own life and experience remained an enduring spur to subsequent political action. In contrast to the optimism of social democracy before 1914, and 1933, Reuter was indeed driven more by the memories of past suffering than by confident predictions based on a Marxist dialectic. The memory of past horrors, those witnessed personally and those witnessed from afar, rather than a confident theory of historical evolution was driving this man of the center left.

A majority of voters in the Western occupation zones, however, turned to the Christian Democratic Union, whose leadership had a very different view of the relationship between democratization and the Nazi past. Konrad Adenauer was sixty-nine in 1945, and seventy-three when elected to be the first chancellor of the Federal Republic in 1949. He remained in that position until 1963, and the era of that time is rightly named after him. The major conservative figure, he also brought about the sharpest break with German political traditions. Most notably, he broke from the anti-western *Sonderweg* which had characterized modern German conservatism before 1945 and founded a new West German conservatism oriented to the West both militarily and strategically, as well as to a renewed Catholic-based defense of natural right. This did not represent a change of views on his part, but instead reflected

the delegitimation of the dominant strands of German conservatism following 1945.

In a number of speeches during the occupation era, Adenauer argued that National Socialism and its crimes had “been possible” for the following reasons: Prussian authoritarianism; the weakness of the individualist tradition in Germany in contrast to the celebration of the state and the nation in German Idealism and Romanticism; the “materialist world view of Marxism,” which eroded religious faith and fostered nihilism; an ideology of racial superiority which filled the vacuum left by the erosion of the dignity of all human beings grounded in Christian natural right. For Adenauer, the antidote to these ills was democracy resting on the basis of Christian natural right, and the belief in the dignity and value of every individual flowed from it. He broke with the previously dominant authoritarian conservative traditions concerning the relationship of the state to the individual, and thus inaugurated a novelty in modern German history: an “anti-authoritarian right.”¹⁰ However, in his plea for a Christian revival, he said nothing about centuries of Christian-inspired anti-Semitism, or the need for Christians as Christians to examine this aspect of the denial of natural rights in their own tradition.

Like Schumacher, Adenauer believed Nazism had spread deeply and broadly into German society. He declared his determination to stamp out “the National Socialist and militarist spirit in Germany.” He agreed that active Nazis, military leaders, and certain economic leaders had to be called to account and dismissed from their current positions. Adenauer called for trials, in German courts, of those guilty of committing crimes. Yet these early declarations soon gave way to the demands of electoral expediency. In election campaign speeches of spring and summer 1946, when the Nuremberg Trials were still going on and thousands of criminals had yet to be charged, Adenauer repeated his assertions in his Cologne University address that “we **finally** (*endlich*) should leave in peace the followers, those who did not oppress others, who did not enrich themselves, and who broke no laws.”¹¹ There were eight million members of the Nazi Party in May 1945. In the first years after the war, the Allies initiated proceedings against over 80,000 Germans for possible conviction of war crimes or crimes against humanity. Yet less than a year after the war ended, Adenauer was already adopting a tone of exasperation evident in the use of the term “finally” (*endlich*) in referring to hopes for an end to questioning of former members of the Nazi party. In fact, the questioning had barely

begun in spring and summer 1946. At this early date, Adenauer could not possibly know the identities and numbers of Germans who had and had not engaged in war crimes and crimes against humanity—or in his terms, who was and who was not a “harmless” follower.

Both Schumacher and Adenauer—as well as future West German President Theodor Heuss—agreed that National Socialism had deep roots in German history and society. Both agreed that a democracy could be based only on a complete rejection of Nazism. By 1951, Adenauer adopted the positions Schumacher first clearly voiced in 1947 regarding the need for a German government to offer financial restitution to Jewish survivors and for close relations with the new state of Israel. Both wanted to build a liberal democracy in Germany. Schumacher wanted to do so by directly confronting and purging the Nazi past. For Adenauer on the other hand, liberal democracy in post-Nazi Germany could not be established against the will of the majority. Democracy would have to rest on a shaky foundation of public silence about the crimes of the recent past.

Adenauer opted for a policy of integration of disillusioned former members of the Nazi party and their families and friends into the new West German democracy in favor of Schumacher’s option for a sharper confrontation with compromised elites and individuals. On the one hand, in 1952 Adenauer overcame opposition in his own party to implement the *Wiedergutmachung* agreement with Israel and Jewish survivors, an agreement that had unanimous support from the SPD. On the other hand, he did not support West German trials for crimes against humanity after the establishment of the Federal Republic in 1949. On the contrary, in public statements and in private communications with the American High Commissioner for Germany, John J. McCloy, he pushed for amnesty and leniency towards those who had already been convicted of crimes by the Allies in the occupation period.¹²

The contrast between Schumacher and Adenauer underscores a key feature of postwar West German history: the conflict between democratization and justice. Daring more democracy in the early years resulted in the election of political leaders, such as Adenauer, who argued that a direct and full accounting of past crimes would only fan the flames of a nationalist and neo-Nazi revival—and thereby endanger the still fragile West German democracy. Hence, for the sake of liberal democracy, the less said about the past, the better. Theodor W. Adorno understood the situation very well in his classic

essay on the meaning of coming to terms with the Nazi past. The repression of that past, he wrote, was far less the product of unconscious processes or deficient memory than it was “the product of an all too wide awake consciousness...In the house of the hangman,” he quipped, “it is best not to talk about the rope.”¹³ As Schumacher and the Social Democrats discovered, those who did “talk about the rope,” lost national elections.

Theodor Heuss, the President of the Federal Republic from 1949 to 1959 was another very significant voice amidst the reticence and silence of the Adenauer era. Heuss emerged from the Nazi period chastened by his disastrous vote for the Enabling Law in 1933 but also determined to defend the oft-defeated liberal tradition in German politics. In his speeches he established a tradition of moral and political reflection on the Nazi past which constituted a startling counterpoint to Adenauer’s public reticence. “No one, no one will lift this shame from us“ (*Diese Scham nimmt uns niemand, niemand ab!*”), his address at the dedication of the memorial at the former Nazi concentration camp in Bergen-Belsen on November 30, 1952, was his fullest and most direct discussion of the crimes of the recent past.

Whoever speaks here as a German, must have the inner freedom to face the full horror of the crimes which Germans committed here. Whoever would seek to gloss over, make little of or diminish the depth of these crimes, or even to justify them with reference to any sort of use of so called “reason of state” would only be insolent and impudent.¹⁴

The Germans, he continued, knew what had happened. He rejected arguments to forget the past. The survivors would never forget, and could never forget. Further “the Germans must never forget what people of their own kind (*Menschen ihrer Volkszugehörigkeit*) did in these shameful years.”¹⁵

Heuss rejected the arguments of postwar Germans concerning what “the others”—in the internment camps of 1945-1946, or the camps in the Soviet zone and the show trials in Waldheim—had done. Violence and injustice were not things to „be used for mutual compensation.“¹⁶ Those murdered were not abstract groups but “human beings, like you and me. They had fathers, children, husbands, wives.”¹⁷ In saying that no one would ever lift this shame from the Germans, Heuss bequeathed a legacy of responsibility—not guilt—for courageously facing the dark past. In his postwar speeches, he

placed the discourse of patriotism and courage in the service of public memory. Courage and love of country, he said, now meant facing rather than avoiding the difficult past. In his speech in Bergen-Belsen, and his praise for the German resistance of July 20, 1944, Heuss gave encouragement to those lawyers, scholars, journalists, intellectuals, and politicians who did seek a sharper confrontation with the past. He planted seeds in the small elite political culture of the 1950s which sprouted in the mass culture of protest and critical examination of the 1960s.

The Bergen-Belsen ceremonies of November 30, 1952, were historically significant for a second, less well-known speech delivered by Nahum Goldmann just before Heuss's.¹⁸ Goldmann was the President of the World Jewish Congress and a leading participant in the *Wiedergutmachung* negotiations with Adenauer. In addition to representatives from Britain, the United States, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Sweden, France, Yugoslavia, and Israel, there were sixty-five representatives of Jewish communities and organizations in Germany, Europe, Israel and the United States at the ceremonies. Jewish survivors had gathered at the former concentration camps since 1945 for memorial services. The Bergen-Belsen ceremonies of November 30, 1952, were the first occasion during which they were joined by the ceremonial head of state of the Federal Republic. With the *Bundespräsident* sitting nearby, Goldmann presented a history of Jewish suffering and survival. He stressed the central role of anti-Semitism for the Nazi regime, the centrality of Jewish suffering during the Nazi era, and the uniqueness of the crime compared to past episodes of mass murder. "No one," he said "had to pay so frightfully for the Hitler period as did we Jews." Whatever happened to German memory, "we will forever keep reflection on the Jewish victims of Nazi terror in our history." The ten thousand who were buried in Bergen-Belsen, he continued "symbolize for us all the millions who found their tragic end in Auschwitz, Treblinka, Dachau, and in Warsaw and Vilna and Bialistock and in countless other places."¹⁹

On the same day, November 30, 1952, eleven Jewish communists, having been convicted of being members of an international "cosmopolitan" espionage conspiracy that allegedly included American and Zionist intelligence services and foreign Jewish capitalists were executed at the end of the Slansky show trial in Prague. Four days later, Paul Merker, a former member of the East German Politburo was arrested in East Berlin on similar charges, and subjected

to the beginning of four years of investigative detention in prison. In December-January 1952-1953 a general purge of “cosmopolitans,” mostly Jews, took place in East Berlin.²⁰ It insured that discussion of the Jewish catastrophe would remain on the periphery of East German political discourse, and eliminated opponents of what became four decades of East German hostility to Israel.²¹ So it was particularly ironic, not only that a full narrative of the Jewish catastrophe received prominence in an official West German ceremony at the moment of its definitive suppression in East Germany, but also that Goldmann’s history drew attention to the Eastern geography of the Holocaust, that is, to sites of destruction which after 1945 lay within the Soviet bloc. In the very same period in which the communists were purging Jews and those who were suspected of sympathy for Israel on the grounds of being agents of **Western** imperialism, Goldmann at Bergen-Belsen drew attention to the **Eastern geography** of the Holocaust and thereby offered a memory that did not fit easily into the fault lines of the Cold War. He recalled Nazi crimes on the Eastern front in World War II at a time when containment of the Soviet Union and Western anti-communism often tended to displace memories of the crimes committed by the Nazis on the Eastern front during World War II. While the communists denounced “cosmopolitans” as agents of Western imperialism, Goldmann’s speech indicated that memory of the Holocaust did not fit into the current Cold War divisions.

Obviously, the destruction of German and European Jewry precluded any broad restoration of the German-Jewish tradition after 1945. Goldmann’s speech, however, evoked the blend of particularism and universalism which had been so important for German-Jewish enlightenment. The Jewish catastrophe, he concluded, had a “general significance for humanity.” For the Germans, its importance was that of an “everlasting warning” about the dangers of exaggerated nationalism and racism. “I know,” Goldmann said, “that there are many Germans, symbolized by the President of the Federal Republic [Heuss, JH] who are with us, who fully understand this warning, and who want to do everything to spare their people a second experience like the Hitler period.”²² But there were others among the Germans who did not want to hear these warnings, who closed their eyes in the face of the “awful facts of the extermination of the Jews.” In all nations there were people who were ready to adopt extreme nationalism and racism. “Hitler did not only exterminate six million Jews. He destroyed six million human beings, and many millions of non-Jewish people

as well.” However legitimate the idea of the nation is, “the idea of the connectedness and bonds of all the peoples of humanity is a hundred times more legitimate, greater and more fruitful.”²³ Memory of Jewish catastrophe did not preclude memory of the suffering inflicted on others. Speaking on behalf of those who suffered “more than any others” in the Nazi era, Goldmann said “we have suffered more than you and we will never forget our suffering.” Yet he also called for a rejection of racism and war and appealed to the spirit of human cooperation beyond national consciousness. The “only and the genuine atonement for the crimes of the past epoch, for which in the last analysis our whole generation is guilty” was “to do everything to inwardly overcome this epoch and to work together for a better future for all.”²⁴ For Goldmann, memory of the particularities of the Holocaust led to a renewed emphasis on the imperatives of universal morality. Memory should break, not continue, the chain of hatred, racism, and nationalist particularism. Like Schumacher and Reuter, Goldmann’s reaffirmation of Enlightenment morality was infused with a tragic sensibility.

It is hard to imagine a more striking contrast than that between Nahum Goldman speaking next to Theodor Heuss in Bergen-Belsen and the Slansky executions in Prague on the same day, followed by the anti-cosmopolitan purge about to reach new heights of anti-Jewish intensity in East Berlin. The communists’ attack on Western imperialism and cosmopolitanism in the early 1950s overlapped with older German nationalists’ resentments against the West. Both the older nationalist Right, and the Marxist-Leninists who led the anti-cosmopolitan campaigns, associated Jews with the west, especially with capitalism and international finance.²⁵ Yet at the very moment when the communists were denouncing Jews as cosmopolitans who were serving the interests of Western imperialism, Goldmann was reminding West Germans of the crimes of the past which so many had wanted to forget.

In the early years in West Germany, these were isolated voices amidst the larger silence. Based largely on multiple restorations of anti-Nazi political traditions repressed in 1933, some political leaders in the Federal Republic helped to establish a tradition of reflection on the Nazi past. At the same time that it was being repressed in “anti-fascist” East Germany, memory of the Jewish catastrophe found a foothold in a part of the elite political culture of the Federal Republic. In years in which daring more democracy led to less discussion of the Nazi past, Schumacher, Heuss, Reuter, Goldmann and others

spoke for and to a minority of West German politicians and intellectuals who believed that more, rather than less discussion of the dark past was essential. Contrary to an oft-repeated assertion, discussion of the Nazi past in West Germany did not begin in the 1960s. The few voices raised amidst the larger silence of the 1950s established a tradition of elite political reflection which contributed to the broader-based culture of reflection since the 1960s. The communists spun conspiracy theories about Jews, capitalists, and the Cold War. Adenauer did support restitution and close ties to Israel, but he did not support an aggressive program of war crimes trials, nor did he speak often about the crimes of the Nazi past. In the fifteen years after 1945, in the Western occupation zones and then in the Federal Republic, with a few exceptions among moderate conservatives, it was West German liberals in the Heuss tradition and Social Democrats who most willingly discussed the Nazi past and the Holocaust, and who supported restitution, close ties to Israel, and a serious program of justice for the crimes of the Nazi era. As would befit the era of multiple restorations, those German political leaders who had fought against Nazism and the persecution of the Jews before 1945 were the leaders who at the earliest point, most frequently, most passionately, and most consistently publicly remembered the crimes of the past and urged their fellow West Germans to accept the burdens they left behind.

ENDNOTES

¹ The following draws on material from my book *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanies* under contract to Harvard University Press.

² See Jeffrey Herf, „Multiple Restorations: German Political Traditions and the Interpretation of Nazism, 1945-1946,“ *Central European History* 26, no. 1 (1993), pp. 21-55.

³ Thomas Nipperdey, „1933 und die Kontinuität der deutschen Geschichte,“ *Nachdenken über deutsche Geschichte* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1986), pp. 186-205; and Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

⁴ Kurt Schumacher, „Wir verzweifeln nicht!,“ in *Kurt Schumacher: Reden, Schriften, Korrespondenzen: 1945-1952*, ed. Willy Albrecht (Berlin-Bonn: J.H.W. Dietz, 1985), p. 217.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ On Schumacher and the German Social Democrats on Jewish related matters including restitution see Schlomo Shafir, „Das Verhältnis Kurt Schumachers zu den Juden und zur Frage der Wiedergutmachung,“ in *Kurt Schumacher als deutscher und europäischer Sozialist*, ed. Willy Albrecht (Bonn: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1988); and „Eine ausgestreckte Hand? Frühe amerikanisch-jüdische Kontakte zu deutschen Sozialdemokraten in der Nachkriegszeit,“ *IWK. Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, XXV, 2 (June 1989). On the social democratic emigration in New York and the Jewish Labor Committee see Werner Link, „German Political Refugees in the United States During the Second World War,“ in *German Democracy and the Triumph of Hitler*, ed. Anthony Nicholls and Erich Mathias (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971); Jack Jacobs, *Ein Freund in Not: Das Jüdische Arbeiterkomitee in New York und die Flüchtlinge aus den Deutschsprachigen Ländern, 1933-1945* (Bonn: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1993); Gail Malmgreen, „Labor and the Holocaust: The Jewish Labor Committee and the Anti-Nazi Struggle,“ *Labor's Heritage*, III 4 (October 1991), pp. 20-33.

⁷ On Schumacher's trip to the United States in 1947, see *Kurt Schumacher*, op. cit., pp. 547-570.

⁸ Ernst Reuter, „Ansprache auf der Gedenkfeier des Bezirksamtes Neukölln zum 10. Jahrestag der Vernichtung des Warschauer Ghettos am 19. April 1953,“ in *Ernst Reuter: Schriften, Reden*, vol. 4 (Berlin: Propylaen, 1976), pp. 714-721.

⁹ Ibid., p. 716.

¹⁰ See Konrad Adenauer, „Grundsatzrede des 1. Vorsitzenden der Christlich-Demokratischen Union für die Britische Zone in der Aula der Kölner Universität,“ in *Konrad Adenauer 1917-1967. Eine Auswahl*, ed. Hans-Peter Schwarz (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1975), pp. 82-107.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 92.

¹² On this see Thomas Schwartz, *America's Germany: John J. McCloy and the Federal Republic of Germany* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

¹³ Theodor W. Adorno, „Was Bedeutet Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit,“ in Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften* 10:2, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 558.

¹⁴ Theodor Heuss, „Das Mahnmal,“ in Heuss, *Die Grossen Reden: Der Staatsmann* (Tübingen: Rainer Wunderlich, 1965), p. 224. Also see Heuss, „Diese Scham nimmt uns niemand ab: Der Bundespräsident sprach bei der Weihe des Mahnmals in Bergen-

Belsen,“ *Bulletin des Presse- und Informationsamtes der Bundesregierung* Nr. 189, (December 1, 1952), pp. 1655-1656; and see Bundesarchiv Koblenz, NL Heuss B122, 2082.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 226.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 227.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 1656.

¹⁸ Nahum Goldmann, „Goldmann“ [Speech at Bergen-Belsen, November 30, 1952] Bundesarchiv Koblenz, NL Theodor Heuss, B122 2082, p. 1.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 1-2.

²⁰ On these events see Jeffrey Herf, „East German Communists and the Jewish Question: The Case of Paul Merker,“ *Journal of Contemporary History* 29, 4 (1994), pp. 627-662; „Dokumentation: Antisemitismus in der SED,“ *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 42, 4 (1994), pp. 635-667; and the more extensive discussion in *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanies*, forthcoming.

²¹ On the Jewish question before and after 1945 in German Communist discourse see Herf, „German Communism, the Discourse of ‚Antifascism‘ and the Jewish Catastrophe,“ in *Resistance Against the Third Reich, 1933-1990*, ed. Michael Geyer and John W. Boyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 257-294.

²² Ibid., p. 4.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

²⁵ See Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft in der DDR* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992), esp. pp. 101-115.