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TRANSFORMING THE CENTER, ERODING THE MARGINS
ESSAYS ON ETHNIC AND CULTURAL BOUNDARIES IN GERMAN-Speaking COUNTRIES

EDITED BY
DAGMAR C. G. LORENZ
AND
RENA'TE S. POSTHOFEN

CAMDEN HOUSE
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PETER WERRES

National Identity under Siege: Postwall Writing in Germany

When one analyzes the rich body of contemporary German literature and explores the complex cultural matrix informing present-day literary production, a critically balanced perception is, of course, impossible at this point — in the aftermath of truly disorienting changes and in a time of crisis for even the most long-standing cultural paradigms. Contemporary German literature is generated by a culture that in the course of this century has undergone extraordinary historical experiences, although most contemporary writers have personally experienced only postwar German life. With the end of the millennium in sight, some may wonder whether history will repeat itself. The ends of centuries traditionally have generated a flurry of disquieting writing that questioned concepts of national identity. At the end of a millennium, one can expect to see the reemergence of cyclical views of history, proclamations of the end of history altogether, or even apocalyptic notions of impending Armageddon.

The sequence of events known as German history has over time seen various attempts at national identity formation. Contemporary German literary discourse about issues of national consciousness and identity has moved toward the end of any preestablished consensus, even in dissent. German reunification did not come to be a unifying theme, rather it seems to have precipitated a loss of consensus. It remains to be seen whether German intellectuals, in the tradition of *hommes de lettres*, will be capable of reconstructing — out of competing notions of identity in a multicultural society — a German collective or cultural identity, a supposedly irreducible positionality of individuals considered German (as happened earlier, albeit under different premises, in German Romanticism, along the lines of German "cultural nation" versus French "national state"). It also remains to be seen whether an identity, and what kind, will emerge in a hybrid culture or whether it will simply be superimposed by the dictates of political and economic reality.

The emerging trends to be discussed in this article did not necessarily start with the fall of the wall; for the most part, they constitute trends that
dialects to spread their often bold messages in the media, thus becoming spokespersons of culturally long-dispossessed geographic margins: Georg Danzer, Hans Söllner, and Walter Moßmann.

These literary trends have been frequently discussed in critical assessments, as have been contemporary issues of national identity, and even a general discussion cannot be considered within the scope of this article. The interactive impact of two forces underlying these developments, however, has largely gone unexamined. It constitutes the main focus of this article. To understand the most recent developments in contemporary German literature (or is it, by now, literature in Germany?), two major trends must be kept in mind beyond the more obvious literary, philosophical, and cultural developments, including those linked to reunification: one is genre-related, the other involves the larger society, yet they both create the backdrop to much of contemporary writing in Germany, especially where German identity formation is at issue. The first trend would appear to be only marginally related to issues of national identity, the second only marginally related to literary issues, yet interacting together they have in recent years helped produce unique forms of literary expression that reach an ever growing clientele of consumers / recipients.

Out of the multitude of postmodernist trends and countermovements, there emerges a tapestry, the orthogonals of which all point in the same direction: away from a solidified notion of national identity and away from a traditional literary canon that was all too often the product of unquestioned constructs of national identity. In a two-pronged approach, this article will explore genre-related issues and address matters more directly related to the stated topic, the recent challenges to traditional concepts of national identity and their impact on emerging literary trends.

As regards literary genres: Along with the ongoing redefinition of national identity went an intensified redefinition of literature and the role of literature in a so-called Kulturation. Continuing postmodernist trends, the concept of what constitutes literature has come under new scrutiny: German departments in Germany and abroad now often concern themselves with the issues that a few years ago were considered fringe phenomena or were attributed to different fields altogether. Cases in point for this change are the University of Marburg — once a symbol of the German Bildungsuniversität — which now sports a department of Neure Deutsche Literatur und Medien, and the German Department of nearby University of Gießen, which offers a seminar analyzing various aspects of graffiti. In 1997, the Germanistenmag finally acknowledged these trends and admitted media studies as a fully recognized branch of German studies. These developments may be considered a reaction to a literary elite and an elite literature that were often perceived as increasingly limiting and self-limiting. They may also represent a literary self-

deconstruction or a trend toward increasing self-referentiality. The highbrow elements, the feeding on itself, as it were, literature’s almost cannibalistic traits, directed the impatient and frequently frustrated and annoyed public toward more user-friendly forms of literature. Consequently, more popular forms of literary expression suitable for multimedia packaging have taken over (and in some cases have actually taken back) much of the terrain slowly abandoned by so-called high-brow literature. Amidst a continuing redefinition of the canon along postmodernist lines, recent years have seen an increased recognition of nonmainstream writing and the acceptance of former fringe genres like film, song, and popular art by the critical establishment.

A 1996 German survey showed that among all professional groups, writers have recently taken the steepest nose-dive in social prestige. According to a 1995 German study on literacy, approximately four million Germans are presently to be deemed borderline illiterate (sekundärer Alphabetismus). A 1996 Dutch study echoed these findings, adding that fewer books are being read every year; recent Austrian figures show that fewer than 5 percent of society reads fiction of any type: In an increasingly librophobic climate, a newly emerging “high-stim”(ulation), “short-attention-span,” “information overload” computer generation would appear to want information and opinions served fast and in sound-bytes to suit the often hybrid lifestyles. After all, as we are often reminded these days, orality has always been a prominent feature of human society: epic, theater, and lyric were originally oral media. Contemporary culture seems to be experiencing the “gradual end of the classical age of reading.” It no longer has any use for conspiratory literary codes, for the cryptography that had characterized much of recent mainstream German literature. In a world that shows less and less interest not only in the written word, but in words altogether (often preferring icons instead), new and, at the same time, very ancient forms of communicating messages have emerged or reemerged.

At the end of our millennium, creative material has to a high degree become “societalized” — I am alluding to the virtually untranslatable Marxist term Vergeellschaftung, which portrays individual ownership, including that of intellectual / creative material, as eventually blending with the creative achievements of others into a commonly held property, into public domain. Today, this is, to some degree, true for literature, to a large degree for film, and to an even much larger degree for musical material. In its latest form, this phenomenon can be observed in the so-called rave or techno scene from Hamburg to New York and Tokyo, where disc jockeys craftily mix existing multimedia material from all over the globe into a virtual bombardment of acoustic and visual stimuli. Contemporary artistic achievements would thus appear to have become part of a global reference pool on which self-proclaimed artists draw for their own creations — the ultimate form of “so-
cialization.” In the eyes of the younger generation, mining the extreme margins of human experience (even those perceived as freakish in the eyes of mainstream society) may lead to a better understanding of questions presently at the center of human experience. With its flashes of brilliance, its brief and forceful assertions of the creative spirit, more popular, multimedia-suitable culture may be filling a newly emerging void. Even when dealing with emotionally troublesome legacies, the genres of popular culture may turn that which is difficult to express, even the supposedly unspeakable, into something that can be communicated and at times even mocked: a “carnivalization” of public German life, as envisioned — albeit toward different ends — in Marx’s famous “Einleitung zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie” (1844, “Introduction to the Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right”) has been under way for some time; it started in the late 1960s with the “carnivalization” of Western university life in the form of “go-ins,” “sit-ins,” and “teach-ins” and has since spread like wildfire through all areas of cultural life.

Among individual subgenres, it is especially songs and essays that have emerged or reemerged as prominent new forms of literary expression. As regards the former, the slogan runs in the tradition of Brecht: Words make you think, music makes you feel, and songs make you feel thoughts. Over the last quarter of this century, the song, political or not, has regained much of the position it held as a form of public discourse in earlier centuries. As regards essays in the proud tradition of Montaigne, Peter Schneider and Hans Magnus Enzensberger, devout Europeans, have lifted the genre to new heights in the last decade and in the process challenged dated patterns of national identity formation.

Similarly, the recognition of film has been upgraded in recent years and has allowed cinema to be included as a topic of literary discussion. Relying on the universal language of film, this medium is capable of offering a degree of directness obviously beyond the ability of the written word. Often questioning national consensus, recent German films offer more multi- and transcultural aspects than any other medium. Many, particularly the ones by Wim Wenders, have polylingual scripts; in the context of multicultural inclusiveness, Doris Dörri’s 1995 Nobody Loves Me, for instance, costars an Afro-German. And many of the more recent German films, especially those by Dörri, manage to escape the cloud of doom plaguing much of earlier highbrow German cinematic production dominated by Wendersesque contrivance, as these new films tend to be funny in intelligent ways. No longer exists there a dichotomy between profitably entertaining and artistically valuable.

Not only the big screen offers new dimensions: Established writers, at times, try their hand at intelligent TV series. For instance, with “Liebling Kreuzberg,” the recently deceased novelist Jurek Becker created one of the most successful series in German TV history; his screenplays made him more famous than any of his novels ever had. And there are other, even more unprecedented forms of literary expression: talk show as theater, theater as talk show. Enzensberger’s most recent play, appropriately entitled Nieder mit Goethe (1996, “Let’s Do Away with Goethe”), staged in Weimar in the form of a talk show, constitutes an innovative affront not only to the genius loci and mainstream German literature, once referred to as Nationalliteratur, but to cherished German concepts of the function of literature and the arts: After centuries of high-brow German achievements, there exists, according to Hanna Schygulla, who plays a part in this talk show / play, “a yearning for mediocrity.” (Does this spell enough apocalyptic, end-of-millennium doom for the German intellectual elite and traditional national concepts of Bildung?)

Moreover, there is increasing recognition for even the most popular forms of literary expression. A case in point is the popular singer Udo Jürgens, who was recently awarded the Grotes Ehrenzeichen der Republik. Over time, more intellectually oriented singers, Liedermacher, had managed to (re)establish guitar poetry as a medium of social discourse and a literary subgenre in its own right. They were, so to speak, the thinking person’s Udo Jürgens, who at their best can be seen as cultural philosophers who have their finger on the pulse of society. In recent years, some of these Liedermacher won prestigious national literary prizes, most notably Wolf Biermann, who received the Büchner Prize, Germany’s major literary award, in 1991 and the Heine Prize in 1993, and, as the first writer ever, the Nationalpreis in 1997. Of course, popular genres such as the ones mentioned here often have to compete head-on with Hollywood and other citadels of the global entertainment industry whose function is increasingly reduced to delivering demographic target groups to their respective advertisers.

In theory, the fact that some forms of literary production have revitalized or even given birth to increasingly popular fringe genres may constitute a challenge to the national literary canon, but it does not per se pose a challenge to concepts of national identity. Yet, as it turns out, the at times bold messages of unconventional fringe genres tend to question any seemingly preestablished consensus. Regarding national identity constructs, fringe genres frequently carry the messages of societal margins, of socially marginalized, or geographically disadvantaged groups.

As for the second issue, national identity: In a trend only at first glance unrelated to literary issues — and very much related to the subject of this article — the traditional concepts of what constitutes an individual’s identity within society, his or her supposedly irreducible positionality, is presently being challenged on many fronts. Cities and regions, not nations, are becoming the principal site of identity for most people in Europe. Mentalities
are changing fast. A more or less quiet revolution is under way, as lives are increasingly defined on two levels: locally / regionally and internationally / globally.

The rise of a global economy and a communications / transportation revolution have unleashed forces beyond the control of any nation-state. The nation-state is no longer the main economic and cultural reference point, as the faith in any national government's ability to respond to contemporary challenges is rapidly eroding. Europe is undergoing radical changes: Overregulated nation-states are too big to manage the problems of daily life, yet at the same time too small to handle international challenges ranging from environmental problems to the task of negotiating with the only remaining superpower, the United States, on a more nearly equal basis. Already, member nations of the European Union (EU) have ceded some of their sovereign powers in the hope of becoming more competitive players on the world stage. People are no longer looking to their national capitals for guidance — they increasingly disparage them as havens for slothful bureaucrats and feckless politicians. In the past, a regional focus, of course, often entailed ethnic chauvinism — and for some areas of South-Eastern Europe it still (or again) does. Yet, regional issues, if linked with transnational or even global concerns, quickly lose their once potentially chauvinistic dimensions.

With the breakdown of the nation-state, Europeans are not only crossing the bridge to the next millennium, they are also returning to their historical roots. Life in Charlemagne’s Francoian Empire, for example, was regional and at the same time contextualized within the continuation of a multinational and multicultural empire: Back then, even businessmen, holding up the tradition of the West-Roman Empire, communicated in Latin, not (as generations of German teachers have tried to make students believe) in German. Europe’s new focus on cities and regions is also reminiscent of a Europe based on city-states forming transnational and multicultural networks such as the Hanseatic League, the alliance of northern port cities that were sovereign entities in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Once again, Europeans may identify themselves as Florentines or Venetians, Hamburgers or Amsterdammers, as they did prior to the emergence of nation-states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After all, the national paradigm and the nation-state proved mixed blessings at best. They produced the ugly, destructive demons of chauvinist nationalism. Incidentally, emigrants from and minorities living in Germany have, over time, also defined themselves in city or regional terms. As an example, a German-born Jewish person may identify him- or herself not as a German Jew, but as a Frankfurter or Wertheimer Jew.

One of the most prophetic statements of the late French President François Mitterand postulated that for Europe to truly grow together, it would have to become porous at its internal borders. Yet, active efforts to create a new Europe as envisioned by Mitterand have merely fed into, or gone hand in hand with, already emerging trends. For some time, transnational communities — for instance, across the Dutch, German, and Belgian borders — which had flourished in medieval times as major trading centers, have been revived. The Saarland, Luxembourg, and Lorraine have been forming into an economic and culturally homogenous supranational entity complete with border-crossing commuter trains. French Lyon, Swiss Geneva, and Italian Turin form a prosperous triangle, the Alpine Diamond, that has become a symbol for an ambitious effort to break the confines of the nation-state and shape a new political, cultural, and economic future.

But how does all of this relate to literature? Not only have some regionally conscious writers become strong advocates of regional empowerment, but they also address pan-European or international issues as well: “Act locally, think globally” is a recurrent slogan in the global village, even among writers. In the nineteenth century, regional writers, or writers of the geographical margins, often attempted to transcend their regionalism while maintaining some local flavor. Earlier in the twentieth century, modernist urban literature and Heimatdichtung, regional literature, pursued opposing programs and points of view. The latter tended to exalt the virtues of rural life with strong regional accents and proud use of respective dialects. In light of the recent European cultural and political developments, as described in this article, it would appear that this type of polarization has become obsolete. There is nothing provincial about thinking locally or regionally any more. Even the literary use of dialect was by the mid-1980s no longer considered drollig, or cute, as it was in the 1950s, when H. C. Artmann experimented with various forms of Viennese dialects, including those of the working-class districts of Ottakring, which at that time carried a low-class stigma in literary circles. In 1997, Artmann ended up winning, somewhat belatedly, what is arguably Germany’s most prestigious literary award, the Büchner Prize.

One striking example of present-day literary regionalism and of literature using dialect and relying on literary fringe genres is potentiated by another emerging phenomenon: border-crossing literary regionality. Among the geographical fringes, which, according to Mitterand, were to fray, the French Alsace and the German Upper Rhine region are paradigmatic. For decades, the entire region has been ablaze with political issues. First, of course, was the inevitable Heim-ins-Reich (back home to the Empire) calls following Alsace’s reunification with France after the Second World War. Yet, more recently, this border-crossing region has been a feisty opponent to the demands of Paris and Bonn as well as to those of big business. In its continued struggle against the lobby of the nuclear industry, for instance, this suprana-
tional region has come together in unprecedented ways, and several writers there have managed to blend postmodernist trends moving toward multiculturality with some of the rebellious counterculture sentiment of the late 1960s and early 1970s. French Alsatian writer André Weckmann, writing in German, ponders regional issues in novels like Odtile oder Das Magische Dreieck (1986, "Odile, or the Magic Triangle"), while, on the other side of the Rhine, Walter Moßmann and a handful of others, beyond pondering issues of national identity, have for years addressed the "little people" on both sides of the Rhine, asking them to resist the dictates of grand economic schemes cooked up in some national capital or corporate headquarters, with their aggressive songs in Almannic dialect. At times, these French and German writers have been joined by Swiss Liedermacher, young activist poets from across the border, who also use the Almannic dialect. International chemical giants have their worldwide headquarters in that region. Their record is replete with incidents of poisoning the Rhine, which flows through several EU member states. This example shows that local issues are inextricably intertwined with global environmental concerns. The literatures of transcultural movements in these geographic border areas use the vernacular, often local German dialects, to mirror a larger cultural diversity and pluralism. In the Swiss context, some of the voices from the margins are the ultimate expression of a plurilingual culture characterized by a unique mix of unity and diversity. 24

Combativeness, again expressing itself largely in dialect, also characterizes the works of several contemporary Bavarian singers, including one of the younger, very colorful figures of regionally based songwriting in Germany, the Upper Bavarian Hans Söllner, who is widely considered the most radical new voice. Labeled, not without reason, the "Rabid Dog of Reichenhall," Söllner, in an amalgam of biting satire and social commentary, hurls thinly veiled puns and insults at regional Bavarian and national authority figures. As a result, the young anarcho-Liedermacher with his caustic wit and his deadlocks --- an uncompromising advocate of cannabis legalization, a truly supranational issue --- has already been the frequent target of (usually unsuccessful) litigation. Söllner is at his best when he challenges traditional German identity constructs 25 and parodies the arrogant bureaucratic discourse. In his irreverent ballads, he describes the interconnectedness between public officials, various industries, and special-interest groups. By 1997, and in ways not seen since the heyday of political songwriting in the late 1960s, some of his songs have already become classics for the young and disenchanted: Söllner speaks the language of the politically minded among the otherwise individualist and politically mostly passive postwall generation.

A similar rejection of the dictates of central government and a rejection of the literary canon also resounds from the songs of some dialect bands from Bavaria, namely, cult groups such as "Die Biermösö Blösn" and other regional bands, including those of the so-called Hessian Wave of dialect songwriting, among them the "Rödelheim Harrteim Projekt" (consisting of two picturesque Ladenburg, a town with Roman roots; and "bap" with Lieder-Dutch "bots" sing in German against comfortable traditional European sent a minority of approximately ten million Low German speakers from Bremen to Rostock, for a long time a silent minority. And then there is, of course, border-crossing rap and punk, the "4 Reeves" (four Afro-German siblings) or the furious "Anarchist Academy." These groups launch vicious attacks on traditional German concepts of national identity, such as the jas sanguinis (according to law, Germans are German by blood). It may not come as a surprise that for most of these fringe artists, German reunification did not constitute a uniting theme.

On the more sedate side, the newly emerging regionalism has produced various forms of fiction and film with quasi-documentary value (or which is even part documentary in nature) — fiction and films concerning themselves, for instance, with issues surrounding a given region’s or city’s experience during the Third Reich. Such works deal with complex issues from a local perspective and often constitute an affront to a nationally cherished consensus regarding a given matter. Among the by now better-known classics are the motion picture Das schreckliche Mädchen (released in the United States under the title The Nasty Girl, 1990) and the much-read novel Herbstmilch (1989, "Autumn Milk").

Distrust of the central government’s ability to handle regional and transnational issues also characterizes many Germans’ — and many German writers’ — assessment of their national government’s role in the reunification process, the most challenging task ever for most of those involved. According to Bielefeld sociologist Niklas Luhmann, organized society organizes itself: "Der Mensch steht im Mittelpunkt und damit allen im Wege" is a witty popular slogan characterizing the so-called system theory. As graffiti, it can be read on city walls and highway overpasses throughout the reunified nation. Most writers give credence to the argument that, ultimately, people were allowed very little input in the course of events once reunification was imminent. In the opinion of many German writers, a new identity was imposed on the citizens of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in much the same way as it had been imposed on Germans on earlier occasions — by the victorious powers of 1806, 1918, and 1945. Similarly, writers’ opinions were, for the most part, studiously ignored in the process of reuniting Ger-
many, as they presently are over the course of entering the third phase of the EU: There was no dialogue between hommes de lettres and politicians on how to achieve inner unity for a new German cultural state, and there is no democratic public dialogue on how to work toward a more cohesive German identity within the emerging New Europe.

In this context, it may have been especially hurtful to the cause of writers that many of them, both in the East and the West, had underestimated the resilience of capitalism / free-market societies and overestimated the viability of Real Socialism and its ability to metamorphose and regenerate. In disbelief, German writers witnessed the concrete-reinforced GDR collapse like a house of cards. The events of 1989 and thereafter made the existence of this fledgling alternative state, which, after all, had spanned much of a lifetime, appear in retrospect like a mere mirage, a footnote to history at best. Yet, the cultural and political explosion of Eastern Europe, although resulting in a return to diversity, pluralism, and social change, lacked, in the eyes of most writers, the utopian perspectives that had been so prevalent a generation earlier. Many of the alt-right ideas of the 1960s have by and large given way to concepts of enlightened self-interest and individualist cost-benefit thinking.

At the close of this century (and millennium), many Germans, not only writers — in the eastern and western parts of their reunited country — find themselves at crossroads after the collapse of the ideologies that determined post-Second World War history. The present political establishment of the new Germany dismisses the utopian dreams as impractical and a hindrance to transforming Eastern Europe and the new German states (Neue Bundesländer) from bankrupt command economy to a lean (and mean), globally oriented free-market society, offering market solutions to deep-seated social problems. Although from different political perspectives, writers such as Günter Grass or Franz Josef Degenhardt view the emerging economic system as “casino-capitalism,” in which companies merge rather than compete. 28

When the “wrapping-up” of East Germany occurred, many writers felt forced into retrospective soul-searching to reassess their long-cherished socialist dreams: Hardly any one of them would have imagined a political ideology that promised so much to intellectuals and delivered so little, a paradox that, as many authors have come to accept, proved untenable in the end. Faced with an impasse, these thoughts led some authors to postulate a crisis of reason altogether, 29 bringing to an end a period shaped by the events of 1789 exactly two centuries after that date. According to Walter Benjamin, “art is the regent of utopia,” and utopianism has often been called, not necessarily the cutting, but certainly the growing edge of society. Eras lacking utopian ideas traditionally may be considered the heyday of the philistine times of sociopolitical rollback and atrophy in the arts. Yet, there was always reason to believe that writers of different generations and political persuasions, once no longer mesmerized by a frozen East / West dualism, would unleash a new intellectual pluralism, and the innate tensions between the forces of unity and diversity would ultimately culminate in dialectical progression.

After the official amalgamation of an affluent “capitalist” state with a relatively poor “Real Socialist” state, writing in Germany mirrors a German identity crisis not experienced to this degree since 1945. 30 Perhaps this crisis is the result of a long overdue act of self-reflection that, according to cultural critics and writers, 31 should have taken place in the postwar era. In a climate characterized by the waning of utopian energies and a mounting nocon-servative cultural criticism that dominates much of the intellectual discourse, old issues of guilt and regret have been reactivated in 1989 and in the postwar era. The competing desires of stonewalling or assigning blame seem like a replay of the postwar scenario, Peter Schneider recently pointed out in one of the first German books seriously reflecting on reunification:

If every advance in knowledge involves the exercise of memory, then in Germany our ability to learn is imperiled. Because German self-righteousness presents an insuperable obstacle to level-headed reflection. People who openly admit that they have to rethink something or that they made a mistake are seen as intellectual cowards. Almost any turn of phrase that describes this process is either negative or so reftly theatrical in tone. We “confess a mistake,” we “abandon our position,” we “shift our stand.” Even the relatively harmless “change of heart” sounds disreputable in political discourse. The archaic ideal of Nibelung loyalty still counts more than the desire for knowledge. Which is why major conceptual upheavals always tend to elicit two apparently very different reactions in Germany: stubborn persistence or energetic reversal. The latter is of course blood brother to the former — since every change of conviction is tainted with betrayal and consequently accompanied by heavy feelings of guilt. This is why these reversals happen so quickly, as people make their flying leaps onto the bandwagon. 32

Franz Josef Degenhardt, a juris doctor, erstwhile law professor, and an ex-Catholic, may serve as an example for option one. He has become increasingly unpopular due to his defense of Real Socialism. His songs were often reduced to a primarily liturgical function among the ever dwindling number of orthodox Marxist / Leninists, and he lost much of his once substantial left-leaning liberal following. Yet, the polit-bard stuck loyally to his colors in an allegiance reminiscent of the Nibelungs, before and after the collapse of Real Socialism in the erstwhile GDR: “Man geht nicht von der Fahne ... erst recht nicht, wenn die Sache verloren ... das tut nur Pack.” 33

Degenhardt’s critical, yet unwavering allegiance to the utopian Socialist cause is viewed by many as “dinosaurie” and a prime example of a grim Teutonic resolve. Following Schneider’s argument, it can be neatly juxta-
posed with the attitude of writers such as Wolf Biermann, Degenhardt’s longtime intimate foe (see Schneider’s option two). Biermann’s metamorphosis into a poet laureate of neoconservative bent and his path from the naïve Communist cadre to the GDR’s enfant terrible and international cause clébre and finally, after 1989, to the role of national media celebrity and darling of the liberal (and at times, even of the conservative) press are well documented.  

In his contributions to Germany’s most serious conservative newspaper, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, he now frequently ridicules his former allies on the left, accuses the German pacifist movement of a “merciless pacifism,” and continues to uncover, with remarkable ease, former Stasi spies among his literary colleagues in the East — and, more recently, in the West as well.

Many East German writers and intellectuals have been blamed by their colleagues for their GDR past, perhaps in an honest attempt to prevent the suppression of yet another German recent past. It is, however, problematic that philosophical and moral guidelines are applied in the process that differ from the ones that are applied to West Germans with respect to their Nazi past. Since 1945, there has hardly been an honest, broad-based examination of the collective German memory. Few of those who are old enough to go that far back are asked the same questions about the Nazi period as the citizens of the former GDR. Concerning the attempts at self-defense by former GDR officials, it is again Peter Schneider who offers the wittiest assessment. He maintains that a much-sought phrase to cushion the slide into the post-Communist era was found in January 1990. It was introduced by Egon Krenz, former secretary general of the Socialist Unity Party, into the language of the day.

When questioned about his role in the Leipzig election fraud of the previous spring, he stated for the record: “From the present perspective, it seems to me that our elections in East Germany were never really free and secret.” Not one of the ever-dour participants at the meeting laughed or applauded Krenz’s new application of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle. In lay scientific terms, the secretary’s statement could be rephrased like this: The appearance of a given subject — say, electoral fraud — depends completely on the observer’s perspective. Not being, but time (or, in fact, the exact date) determines consciousness! But it wouldn’t have mattered if they had laughed, because the motto “From the present perspective” describes, with unprecedented conciseness, the intellectual balancing act that became a popular sport after November 9. Players must combine traditional school figures with new, diametrically opposed movements, all without falling off the bar. The goal of the exercise is a speedy and skilled descent — in sports language, this is called “landing on your feet.”

According to Schneider, the versatility of Krenz’s phrase demonstrates its worth because it brings to mind countless examples and variants the minute one hears it.

Dislocations, splits, and even withdrawals noticed in the media skirmishes suddenly make sense, language being one example. Speech and writing have changed almost overnight and whole areas of everyday political jargon have been abandoned, while others, long forgotten, are suddenly being rediscovered.

Many writers in the former GDR, even those who are not stonewalling or in denial, have remained symbiotically joined or chained to the memory of the former system, even after its demise. Dissidents who had opposed the oppressive political apparatus of “Real Socialism” now often share an inquisitorial zeal comparable only to that of their former oppressors. Former victims frequently turn into victimizers in an attempt of unmasking their former tormentors. In an air of a not altogether un-German role reversal and with considerable self-righteousness, some of these writers, including Hans Joachim Schädlich and Erich Loest, have shown little taste for innovation and diversity. Many of them do not address current political and cultural issues such as the ongoing regionalization and multiculturalism, the migrations and the accompanying xenophobia, all of which are reshaping German society.

In the absence of major unifying themes, the rapid diversification would, for the purpose of attaining a more coherent sense of self, suggest the need to develop a new sense of community and to redefine the cultural center and fringes so that center and margin can engage in a process of mutual redefinition in an atmosphere of trans- and multicultural awareness. Such a process would challenge the status quo and present notions as to which degree the literatures of different marginalized minorities deviate from the dominant value system. The recent tendency to focus on the paradoxical aspects of an existence on the outside is proof of German society’s continued inability to tolerate difference and otherness. On a larger scale, the literary discourse on these key issues could and would contribute to answer the crucial question of Germany’s place and cultural identity within the EU: Is there, culturally speaking, hope for a European Germany, or is there reason to fear a Germany-dominated Europe that defines itself predominantly in anti-German economic terms?

By the summer of 1997, a discourse analysis of more or less public statements on these topics in the confines of the traditional Streitkultur, the public “culture of debate,” reveals a spiraling brutalization of the literary dialogue in Germany. In a country notorious for its inability to dispose of despotic figures, German writers and literary critics have, after the fall of the
wall, shown a virtual obsession with ridding themselves of larger-than-life literary icons who could be considered a red thread running through the process of national identity formation. Any discussion of the castration of literary father figures, of course, would have to begin with Goethe; Enzensberger’s aforementioned 1996 Nieder mit Goethe is a beginning. The literary patriarch Günter Grass was publicly ridiculed by Marcel Reich-Ranicki, and the matriarchal icon Christa Wolf retreated to California amidst a nasty controversy about her role in the former GDR.

Recently, the literary icon bashing has reached new heights with the deconstruction of literary figures who themselves had become famous by knocking national literary icons off their pedestals. John Fuegi’s 1994 demolition of Brecht,33 the ultimate literary father figure of Germany’s progressive forces, was recently followed by the brutally critical lines of Biermann — a former Brecht disciple — about Heiner Müller.42 The playwright Müller had been instrumental in deconstructing the German postwar self-image in plays like his three-part Germania cycle, premiering in 1978 with Germania: Tod in Berlin (“Germany’s Death in Berlin”). In the process, he had become a mainstream German cult figure himself. Two years before his death, he was asked to direct Tristan and Isolde in Bayreuth, that mecca of old-time German identity formation. After Müller was barely in the ground, his statue was already knocked off the pedestal by an irreverent Liedermacher. The trend of icon bashing is continuing amidst devastating revelations concerning the career of a writer who was one of the GDR’s most revered literary figures, Stephan Hermlin, the former vice president of the International PEN.43

At the threshold of the third millennium, are these processes to be seen as literary contributions to the attempts at national emancipation, as German contributions to the proclamations about the end of history, or are they mere manifestations of the relentless old-time German pettiness and self-righteousness?

Notes

1. Such as the ones following the ideas of the Greek philosopher Polybius and some of his contemporaries who at an earlier turn of a millennium subscribed to the idea of two-thousand-year cycles in history. Contemporary literary case in point is Kate Atkinson’s 1997 novel Human Croquet, in which history repeats itself, backward and forward.

2. See, for instance, Francis Fukuyama’s The End of History and the Last Man (1992) or John Updike’s 1997 novel Toward the End of Time.

3. In regards to the recent emergence of violent militia groups and of end-timers, by now preaching their often apocalyptic mass-murder or mass-suicide messages even through web sites, see, for instance, E. J. Dionne Jr., “Heaven’s Gate Cult Members,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, April 5, 1997. “The most advanced forms of modernity join forces with darker impulses that go back to the caves” (A 9). Boston University now sports a Center for Millennial Studies, concerning itself with millennium-related activities.


5. Case in point: the speech delivered to the Federal Parliament by its seniority president, the renowned author Stefan Heym. The text of his address to the new Bundestag’s opening session was, against all protocol, not printed in the next official government bulletin — the head of the German Press and Information Office, by his own admission, did not want to provide the writer, a member of the Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus, with a public forum for his political views.

6. According to the president of the Goethe Institut (in 1996, interviewed in several German publications, among them Die Welt), Germany should, given recent educational trends, brace itself for possibly having to part with the concept of defining itself as a Kulturnation.


8. The emergence of the eristic movement with its belief that the universe is ultimately chaotic (Eris is the Greek goddess of discord) can be seen as one manifestation of this trend — particularly among younger people.

9. Over recent years, “class” would appear to have slipped out of the discussion of what once constituted the “holy trinity” of class, race, and gender issues.

reached us from the fringes of Europe. We are being seriously entertained by it. That is why these books sell so well.” Thomas Steinfeld, “Earlier, the Day Used to Start in a Simple Past. About the Misconceptions Regarding Pure Literature,” Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, March 25, 1997, literary section, p. 1.

31. Even the marketing strategists of the American pop culture industry, which blankets the globe with its products, have come to realize this. According to Steve Clark, Variety, Nov. 11, 1996, MTV Europe has had to work hard to “retain its special identity in an increasingly localized ... marketplace” (51). And Erich Boehm argues that “with pop music becoming increasingly localized around the world,” Americans can no longer simply export American pop music. Variety, Nov. 16, 1996, 52.

32. John L. Flood, ed., Modern Swiss Literature: Unity and Diversity (London: Oswald Wolff, 1985); Walter Moßberger, “‘Gespräche mit Jurko,’” in Tarzan — was nun? Internationale Solidarität im Dichnumel der Widerspruche, ed. Andreas Foritzik and Athanassios Marvakis (Berlin: Libertäre Assoziation, 1997). Alemania is spoken on both sides of the upper Rhine, in the French Alsace, the German upper Rhine valley and Black Forest regions, and the very northern region of Switzerland.

33. In his songs “Der deutsche Tourist” (“The German Tourist”) and “Moi Nega” (“My Black Fellows”).


35. There are dissenting voices defending the Marxist cause. See Christopher Norris, What's Wrong with Postmodernism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992), 25-28.


38. Heiner Müller, Zur Lage der Nation (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1990); Volker Braun, Der Wendehals (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995).

39. Henrik Broder, for example.


43. Ibid., 258.

44. Schneider, The German Comedy, 66-67.

45. Ibid.


Many conservatives, feeling infringed upon by concepts of multiculturalism and anguished over the country's divisions are worried that the fringe unilaterally attempts to redefine the center, as national identity was in their eyes eroded and not enriched by multiculturality.

As recently as November 1996, more than a dozen writers left the West-German PEN in protest over the repeated suggestion that PEN-East and PEN-West should be united in the near future. Six years after German reunification, these PEN-centers still constitute separate entities.


Karl Corino, *Aufen Marmor, innen Gips* (Düsseldorf: Econ, 1996). Hermlin suddenly died unexpectedly in April 1997 — within a few months after the allegations, just one day short of his eighty-second birthday.

GERNOT WEISS

The Foreign and the Own: Polylilingual Literature and the Problem of Identity

The character of language, the notions of the foreign and the own, the concepts of ethnic and individual identity — this is an intricate agglomeration of philosophical problems playing its part in the judgments on the long European tradition of polylilingualism within literary texts. Investigating polylilingual literature, one has to reconstruct the connection drawn between language and identity, as done in the first part of this article. On the background of this reconstruction and its results, one goes further to the aesthetic judgments on polylilingual texts presented by scholars during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. But the premises on which these scholars based their judgments have become dubious. Polylilingual literature has changed as well. Authors like Tristan Tzara and Hugo Ball used polylilingualism within literary texts in order to propose other concepts of identity, which contrasted with the common notions of the nineteenth century. These notions will now be reconsidered.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, there was a remarkable movement in Germany: After the unification of the German states to the one nation-state, some ideologists demanded for excluding superfluous foreign words from the German language. Many a social group and its institutions, as, for example, the *Allgemeine deutsche Sprachverein*, the *Kreisgruppe*, and even skate clubs, shared their intentions and so a real hunt for foreign words began. Hundreds of French and, increasingly in the 1890s, English words were replaced by equivalent German terms. This was meant to be a contribution to the strength of the new empire, as a member of the *Sprachverein* announced: “Wem es gelingt, ein deutsches Wort an Stelle eines entbehrlichen fremden wieder in seine Rechte einzusetzen, der fügt ein Sandkörnchen zu den Grundfesten des Reiches.” The rejection of foreign words was based on the notion that the identity of a people is adequately expressed by its language. Language, one author declared, derives its essence from the uncon-