LETTER FROM GERMANY

THE MYTH OF KA HLSCHLAG*
HANS BENDER

Imagine if you will, during the years one, two, three—if one really accepts the concept of starting from zero—that a large-scale uprooting was instituted in the German linguistic forest. One sees in his mind’s eye Hans Werner Richter and Wolfdietrich Schnurre, Heinrich Böll and Alfred Andersch arm in arm cleansing the German language, sweeping away, fumigating until nothing but the famous bare bones are left, that which is irreproachably cleansed, no longer bearing the odor of brown shirts and sticky with unpleasant memories.

THESE MOCKING LINES OCCURRED IN AN ESSAY BY URS WIDMER IN THE weekly newspaper Die Zeit (26 November 1965), in a retrospective review of German literature barely twenty years old. The title of the essay read: “The ‘Clearing Away’ was not so Clear” (So kahl war der Kahlschlag nicht). At the beginning of the essay, which was also a continuation of the quote above, the startling assertion was proposed in even more sarcastic and final form:

The notion that German post-war literature began with a Kahlschlag is a fairy tale.

For the first time a concept which, up to that point, had been used as a positive characterization of the first poems, stories, and novels to appear

* The term Kahlschlag will be best and most extensively defined for the reader in the course of Mr. Bender’s letter. Originally a specialized usage in forestry meaning “block cutting” or “clear cutting” of a given wooded area, the literary implications of the term are not self-evident in translation. In the book entitled Postwar German Literature: A Critical Introduction (New York: Western Publishing Company, 1970), p. 50, Peter Demetz renders Kahlschlag as “clearing the thicket” and discusses the phenomenon as follows: “Young writers liked the idea of ‘clearing the thicket’ (Kahlschlag), suggested by Wolfgang Weyrauch in 1949, and embraced the most fundamental verbal materials, paratactical syntax, factual reportage, and the sober short story.” In view of its specialized application and the absence of cross translation, the German term has been retained in Mr. Bender’s letter. The Translator.
after 1945, was not only cast into doubt but decisively negated as well. Negated by a young man who did not experience the initial literary efforts after 1945 himself, but rather had read them afterwards and made his critical assessment with considerable detachment. Notable, too, that Widmer's negation has found no challengers, for example from the authors who are still alive and might have defended themselves. On the contrary, amidst apologies they, too, concurred with the negation. From this point on, the negative judgment was repeated, either intensified or modified, by other interpreters reflecting back upon that period.

This negation coincided in the mid-sixties with a judgment of post-war German literature that was increasingly harsh in any case. Widmer belonged to a generation that revolted against other traditions and pretensions of the elder generation. In a collectively determined program they attacked authors who had gotten older, who had established themselves not only in regard to renown and the publication of their books but even more with respect to their economic status in the literary establishment. The program can be surveyed in the documentation *Prose Writing* (Prosa-Schreiben, Literarisches Colloquium: Berlin, 1964), in which the discussions, opinions, and essays of fifteen young Germans are published, students of the literary colloquium, born between 1935 and 1944, among whom recently acclaimed authors were found: Hans Christoph Buch, Peter Bichsel, Hubert Fichte, Hermann Peter Piwitt, and Klaus Stiller. They call the realism of the Böll generation "deceptive," "uncomfortable," "musty," and "gray." Böll himself is ridiculed three times, but along with him all the others are implied who, up to that point, had represented German literature, particularly its prose.

One must acknowledge Urs Widmer's claim to authority. He thoroughly investigated *Kahlschlag* in his essay and in his dissertation 1945 or the "New Language" (1945 oder die "Neue Sprache," Pädagogischer Verlag Schwann: Düsseldorf, 1966). His study included not only the early prose pieces, poems, and essays of authors still famous today—such as Wolfgang Borchert, Heinrich Böll, Ilse Aichinger, Günter Eich, Wolfdichtrich Schnurre, Hans Werner Richter, and Alfred Andersch—but also those of the many others stimulated to write after Nazism and the end of the war, in the ensuing peace and the awakening to a new consciousness. Widmer points out the discrepancy between message and result, between the manifesto and its realization in actual practice. Those authors protested the past, the dehumanization of Nazism and its language, but they continued to be under that influence. They were even more under the influence of politically neutral literature: not only the books of Stefan George and Rainer Maria Rilke, of Rudolf Binding and Hans Carossa, but of Hermann Hesse as well. In the wake of Expressionism and Neo-Romanticism they engaged in a pseudo-popularization of these literary modes. Over many pages Widmer documents this dependency with quotations.

The exception is Wolfgang Borchert. He had found a personal style, but he did not adhere to it consistently. He had encouraged himself to disparage "correct grammar" and "harmony," to dispense with "semi-colons" and the "subjunctive," and nonetheless he fell prey to them again. Widmer's opinion in regard to the split Borchert:

Individual pieces reflect a limitless desire for more reduced, honest, forthright language, others point to formulations whose literary origin is clear. Often one could believe the texts had been written by a different hand.

Evidently even Wolfgang Borchert affords only a partial demonstration of the term *Kahlschlag*.

The term is illustrated again and again, even to this day, by an example that appears to be beyond the pale of criticism—by Günter Eich's seven-stanza poem with the title "Inventory" (Inventur), which begins with the often cited stanza:

This is my cap,  
this is my coat,  
here my shaving gear  
in a linen pouch. *

Dies ist meine Mütze,  
dies ist mein Mantel,  
hier mein Rasierzeug  
im Beutel aus Leinen.

Eich's poem "Inventory" and the term *Kahlschlag* have become myth: the poem "Inventory" as the complement of the concept *Kahlschlag*, and the reverse. They belonged together after a given point in time, were passed on like pawnbroker's items, which accumulate without really being evaluated. Occasionally the source is cited or written in: Wolfgang Weyrauch coined the phrase and used the complementary grouping for the first time in his anthology *One Thousand Grams* (Tausend Gramm), which appeared in 1949. But had any of the people who referred to it any familiarity with the anthology or even had a look at it? Apparently not even Urs Widmer. The anthology is not included in the bibliography of his dissertation. There is

* English version by Teo Savory; see DIMENSION II (1969), 538–539.
no more than a footnote reference to it. What the entire anthology looked like was of no interest later.

One Thousand Grams—today a yellowed book printed on an inferior paper—appeared in September, 1949, in 4,000 copies in the Rowohlts Verlag publishing house, a company whose places of publication were still listed at that time as Hamburg, Stuttgart, Baden-Baden, and Berlin (now Hamburg). A “Collection of Recent German Stories” was Wolfgang Weyrauch’s subtitle for the anthology. Thirty stories by thirty authors, not all of whose names are known today. Among the authors there is none who would have been notable during the Third Reich, but also only a few who suddenly emerged in 1945. Most of the authors had published their first books in the twenties, others in the thirties, even during the war years when tacitly resisting literature was scarcely allowed. Marie Luise Fleisser had experienced her stormy first performances in the second half of the twenties. In 1931 her novel Frieda Geier, the Traveling Flour Seller (Mehlreisende Friede Geier), in 1932 her stories Andorrana Adventures (Andorranaische Abenteuer) appeared. Günter Weisenborn had also become known through his theatrical productions of 1928. His book The Girl of Fanö (Das Mädchen von Fanö), published in 1935, was a successful novel of the day. Prior to the magic year of 1945 Gerhard Pohl had published six and August Scholitis nine new books, Anton Betner three novels, and Richard Drews three volumes of poetry. Alfred Reinhold Böttcher, Walter Kolbenhoff, Kurt Kusenberg, Luise Rinser, and Ernst Schnabel had published their first books in the twenties and thirties. There are only about ten authors in Weyrauch’s anthology who really began writing in 1945. Alfred Andersch and Rolf Schreors are among them. Luise Rinser, Richard Drews, and Günter Weisenborn had had difficulties during the Third Reich. But none of the thirty authors came from out of exile, none of the thirty narratives is written in a language that could be characterized as Kahlsthal in Weyrauch’s sense of the term. In the case of Rolf Schreors, Johann Schuh, Helmuth Schwabe, and a fourth young author, Gerd Behrend, tendencies of a new language and stylistic impetus can be found. The influence of Ernest Hemingway’s reporter style is recognizable, an influence, later repudiated, which nonetheless at that time actually was a model for presenting one’s experiences laconically.

Weyrauch had, by the way, introduced the thirty German narratives with five “model” stories: “The Cow,” by Friedrich Hebel, “The New (Happier) Werther,” by Heinrich von Kleist, “On the Lake,” by Guy de Maupassant, “The Death of the Official,” by Anton Chekhov, and “Strange Fortunes of a Young Englishman,” by Johann Peter Hebel. Thus the model stories do not delineate a conscious attempt to break with the literary past. Precisely these five classical stories have served as exemplary stories during the Third Reich.

The word Kahlsthal, or “clearing the thicket,” appears on page 213 in the final pages of an analysis appended to the anthology One Thousand Grams. Initially Weyrauch uses several metaphors that are supposed to characterize the “tortuous and dark thicket” in which German prose was situated. Several German authors, he writes, “are feeling their way and don’t really know what to do. They don’t know where reality is and they don’t know that reality and literature communicate.” Weyrauch maintains the metaphor when he goes on to write of “inscriptions” and “guideposts” that “have been placed all over”; guideposts “to nihilism, to optimism.” Where do these guideposts originate? One must reread in order to understand the more poetic than essayistic simile. Weyrauch means the strange, new influences of foreign literature that are possible once more. He welcomes them: “We respect these unfamiliar guideposts,” but one should not follow them. It is more important “to found a new prose and to develop that which is ours.” And: “A German literature, which takes—but also gives.”

“But what does it give?” Weyrauch asks. In the answer to that question the magic phrase appears: “German literature provides a Kahlsthal, a clearing away of our thicket.” However, in the following lines Weyrauch discards the concept once more. Of the thirty authors in the anthology One Thousand Grams he says: They attempt “to make our blind eyes see, our deaf ears hear, and our shrieking mouths articulate.” Then, on the next page, it again becomes difficult to follow Weyrauch’s meaning. He writes: “But these authors here”—he means the thirty contributors to the anthology—“are not really aware of what the originators of Kahlsthal practice: the practitioners of Kahlsthal commence with language, substance, concepts, from the beginning.” Where are then the practitioners of Kahlsthal, one asks. Not in this book after all? And how is one supposed to imagine the Kahlsthal of a substance? Later, on the other hand, it is said that the practitioners of Kahlsthal are, indeed, to be found in the anthology. In it there are examples that demonstrate how these authors “start at the beginning, completely from the beginning, with the addition of bits and pieces of plot, with the ABC of sentences and words.” Weyrauch views the narratives that fulfill these conditions as contrasting with the preceding calligraphic literature. The practitioners of Kahlsthal, Weyrauch thinks, “resist the crepe-hanging and foreboding of a new fogginess in which the vultures and the hyenas nest and grope.” “Groping” was a popular expression at that time; Wolfgang Borchert also used it frequently.

In chapter six of the appended analysis the contributors are called outright “the men of Kahlsthal,” but a restrictive parenthesis is immediately added: “—who possibly deny themselves this characterization and the stigma that attaches to it.” They, the men of Kahlsthal, expose themselves to “the mockery of snobs and the suspicion of nihilists and optimists who say, ‘Oh,
these people write this way because they don't know any better.’ But the Kahlischlag writers know or at least have some idea that the new beginning of prose in our country is worthy of the methods and intentions of pioneers.” To the end the metaphor remains true. But Weyrauch becomes terse and objective when he cites the demands that confront the narrators: “The method of objective description. The intent of truth.” And later: “They establish reality . . . They x-ray. Their exactitude is surgical. Their notation is antisepctic. They are on the course to functional writing.”

Where is Günter Eich’s poem “Inventory”? we ask impatiently. Weyrauch quotes it in his appended analysis. The poem did not appear in the anthology One Thousand Grams but rather two years earlier in the anthology collected by Hans Werner Richter, Your Sons, Europe, Poems of German Prisoners of War (Deine Söhne, Europa, Gedichte deutscher Kriegsgefangener, Nymphenburger Verlagsverhandlung, München, 1947). Weyrauch refers to the source, but without giving the year. He writes that the exceptional verses of Günter Eich (in those days still Günther with an “h”) could exemplify what is meant by Kahlischlag and practitioners of Kahlischlag. As such an exemplification the poem “Inventory” is really ideal. In comparison with other poems written previously or at the same time its effect was that of a surprisingly different and new poem. A prisoner of war is talking to himself. He says: “This is” and “I have.” He sorts the small objects that have become so valuable without attributing to them either meaning or metaphysics. No rhymes, no metaphors. There are no statements such as: I suffer, I am lonely, I complain—a man’s conversation with himself is recorded. Eich’s apparently simple intention, that “word and object” coalesce, was realized in this poem. Eich’s poem—no other conclusion can be drawn from the anthology One Thousand Grams—remains the only evidence of Kahlischlag as the term is defined in the appended analysis.

What Wolfgang Weyrauch outlined reflected the demands that were made on literature after 1945. The extent to which these demands were common can be gleaned from reading other essays and remarks, primarily in the newspaper Der Ruf and in the concluding comments of other anthologies, and shortly thereafter in the magazines that began to appear in the early ’fifties. Böll, Schnurre, Andersch, Eich and others, looking back on that period, recognized and described those tasks that had been neglected and remained to be undertaken. The generation that followed had, in any case, a freer, less fettered relationship to language, to the past, to reality, and to society. In concrete, grammatical, in a word, in experimental literature there was no longer a bond with the past. Kahlischlag survives as a quotation, as a paraphrastic description and characterization of an atmosphere of the day by a group of authors who felt the necessity of gaining distance from the Nazi period. Kahlischlag stands at the very threshold of our contemporary literature as a point of departure, as a partial realization, as a goal, as a dream to be aspired to, as a myth.

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