The Politics of German Literature

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Don't go to France, you're too young for the Allied countries; they will be ruled for the next decade by those who waged and won the war—by your father's generation. And woe betide those whose fathers win the war! The world will never be theirs. In France you'll get everything ten years late, when it's no longer worth anything. Go to Germany; there 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.

—Milorad Pavić, *Landscape Painted with Tea*

In the summer of 1990, four years after the so-called *Historikerstreit* had confronted West German intellectuals with the interconnections between historiography and politics, another major intellectual battle, immediately dubbed the *Literaturstreit*, emerged and spread rapidly throughout the country's major journals and literary pages. Just as the *Historikerstreit* had begun with a major article by Ernst Nolte in the cultural section of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* on 6 June 1986, so too what became known as the *Literaturstreit* began with an article by Frank Schirrmacher, the newspaper's young literary critic, in the same venue on 2 June 1990. Between the two intellectual debates lay the sudden and utterly unexpected collapse of the German Democratic Republic in autumn of 1989 and the return not just of a concept but of a political reality which had previously been not only virtually taboo but had seemed totally unrealistic: German reunification.

Yet while the debate four years earlier had not really been ignited until Jürgen Habermas's response to Nolte's article one month later in *Monatshefte*, Vol. 84, No. 1, 1992
Greiner had argued undialectically, accusing Wolf of blatant complicity and conformism and formulism, Schirrmacher argued that it was precisely Wolf’s resistance to the SED regime that was itself implicated in a “familiar,” even cozy relationship to authority: “almost an intimate relationship to the state and its institutions.” Far from accusing Wolf of trying to scrub her own history clean, Schirrmacher asserted that her story was “a book of guilty conscience,” constantly showing the tragedy of a woman whose every attempt at resistance doomed her to a failure which she knew about in advance. For Schirrmacher, Wolf was the paradigmatic figure of the tragedy of the German post-war generation, a generation, Schirrmacher suggested, which was on its way out. Hence, it was time for a paradigm shift.10

In the reaction to these two reviews of Was bleibt, the distinction between Greiner’s one-sided condemnation and Schirrmacher’s nuanced analysis became lost. On the very same page on which Greiner had attacked Wolf, Volker Hage argued that “she can be accused of nothing,” claiming that Christa Wolf had inevitably become a “moral instance” by virtue of the beauty and honesty of her prose, and that the history of her career was a complex mosaic of great importance for international literature as a whole.11 Martin Ahrends argued in the Badische Zeitung that the two critics were themselves opportunists, trying to magnify their own fame by ruining the reputation of a famous and respected author.12 Helga Königsdorf accused Christa Wolf’s reviewers of an “intellectual examination of other people’s navels.”13 Wolf Biermann called Schirrmacher’s review “perfidious.”14 At the writers’ conference held in Potsdam in the middle of June, Walter Jens referred to the articles by Christa Wolf’s critics as “hunting scenes” filled with “show trial thinking,” Friedrich Schorlemmer argued against “denunciation,” Christa Wolf herself stated that she had previously encountered such visceral hatred only in the pages of Neues Deutschland, and Stefan Heym suggested that the entire controversy was a manipulated hate campaign.15 In further responses, Heiner Müller condemned the “Stalinism of the West,” Günter Grass spoke of a “witch hunt,” and the German PEN presidium argued against what it perceived as the rise of a new McCarthyism.16 At the first symposium of the Erich Fried Society, held in Vienna in November under the symposium title “The Writers and the Restoration,” Hans Meyer accused Wolf’s critics of a “destructive urge,” Adolf Muschg spoke about “poison injections from the spray can,” and Christa Wolf, under the “barrage of fire from the Western feuilleton,” lamented the “dismantling of all values of the former GDR.”17 Ivan Nagel even accused Schirrmacher and Greiner of intellectual fascism. Most of the critics’ critics suspected that the seeming attempt to destroy Wolf was in fact an attempt to destroy the last vestiges of an independent GDR identity; it was, after all, Schirrmacher himself who had acknowledged that Wolf alone seemed to guarantee the existence of such an identity.

It is curious but true that without the heated responses to Wolf’s critics, Schirrmacher’s and Greiner’s views would never have become so widely publicized. For this reason the critics’ critics in fact served to propagate ideas that they themselves claimed to find abhorrent, just as, four years earlier, Jürgen Habermas’s attack on Ernst Nolte had made the general public aware of Nolte’s historiographical claims. In each case, it was the “leftist” position which, in attacking the “rightist” position, brought the latter to prominence. In the summer of 1986, however, it was the “leftist” Habermas who had accused the “rightist” Nolte of trying to escape from a specifically German guilt; in the summer of 1990, it was the “rightists” Greiner and Schirrmacher who were accusing Wolf and her defenders of a similar attempt to escape what was now seen as a specifically GDR guilt. Was the Literaturstreit the right-wing answer to the left-wing Historikerstreit?18

Before it is possible to answer this question, two further peculiarities of the debate have to be mentioned. Just as the participants in the Historikerstreit had seemed to be unaware of the historiographical precedents for their own dispute, so too the participants in the Literaturstreit seemed unaware of the longer-term implications of their argument. It was not just that Marcel Reich-Ranicki, the dean of the West German feuilleton, had written similar critiques of Christa Wolf in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in November of 1987,19 or that Hans Noll and Jürgen Serke of Die Welt had published pertinent criticisms of GDR authors earlier in 1990.20 It was that the entire thrust of the revolution in the GDR had fed on the appearance or reality of tension between writers, as representatives for the intellectual strata as a whole, and “the people,” (das Volk), whatever that designation actually meant. After the revolution had moved from the destruction of one-party rule and the state apparatus toward unification with the Federal Republic, it was precisely prominent writers, among them Christa Wolf, who had played a critical role in warning “the people” against unification and in urging the maintenance of an independent, sovereign GDR.21 On 8 November 1989, one day before the opening of the Wall, Christa Wolf had urged her fellow citizens to take responsibility over television, radio, and in the newspapers to “Stay in your home, stay in the GDR,”22 and one month later it was her name that became most prominent among the signers of the declaration “For Our Country,” which called upon all citizens of the GDR to resist annexation by the capitalist Federal Republic and fight for the preservation of a humanistic socialism in a sovereign GDR.23 Monika Maron’s essay “The Writers and the People,” which appeared in Der Spiegel in February of 1990, was an attack on the role of GDR writers in trying to save the GDR.24 Long
before Schirmacher's and Greiner's reviews of Christa Wolf's new book, Maron had already made the argument that GDR writers, as a pampered elite, were guilty of arrogance, complacency, and even hypocrisy in their attitudes toward ordinary citizens' desires for Western standards of living. Maron's argument had not limited itself to any particular writer, but had, rather, examined the implications of writers as a social group in complicity with power. Six months later, even Ulrich Greiner's one-sided attack on Christa Wolf acknowledged that her case was merely another in the long and sad story of "German Poets and Power." Wolf's defenders' eagerness to do battle with her critics had the ironic effect of focusing what had from the very beginning been a broad-based critique of writers in general onto the person of one highly prominent writer, thus further singling out the very woman they claimed to be defending. At the same time, they seemed to forget that the woman who had first raised the more general criticism, Monika Maron, was herself a former East German writer and had, moreover, explicitly included herself in her own critique. They interpreted the debate entirely as an attack from the outside, not as self-criticism.

The second peculiarity of the Literaturstreit also involves its longer-range implications and origins. During the Historikerstreit, Ernst Nolte's critics seemed to have forgotten that for twenty years Nolte had been arguing that both fascism and Communism had similar roots in a totalitarian response to the crises of modernity and that, hence, there was little new in Nolte's 1986 assertion of Communism's priority over fascism. At the same time, neither the "rightists" nor the "leftists" in the debate acknowledged that it was not just the uniqueness of the Holocaust but German collective guilt that was at stake in the argument. What remained largely unspoken in the Literaturstreit was that it, too, revolved around German collective guilt, the inability to put the past aside, and the relationship between literature and historical morality.

Nolte had spoken of the "Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will," "the past that will not pass away." Frank Schirmacher's argument was remarkably similar. Schirmacher argued that for the past forty years East and West German literature had been in paralysis, fixated on a moral response to the horrors of fascism. Postwar German authors, Schirmacher contended, constituted a generation of intellectual Jupiters, constantly contending with and overcoming their fathers, only to turn around and swallow their own sons, bringing time itself to a standstill. Between 1960, when the literature of the Federal Republic had already crystallized in such authors as Günter Grass, Heinrich Böll, Uwe Johnson, Peter Weiss, Martin Walser, Siegfried Lenz, Peter Rühmkorf, and Erich Fried, and 1990, little had changed, argued Schirmacher. The important names were pretty much the same, although the faces had grown older.

Schirmacher formulated a contrast between the "jüngste Vergangenheit," meaning the past which would not go away, and the "älteste Gegenwart," meaning the present which constantly fed on renewed triumphs over a past kept artificially alive precisely for the purpose of these triumphs. The great names of postwar West German literature had stylized themselves as the persecuted critics of a Federal Republican milieu characterized by arrogance, hypocrisy, insensitivity, and, above all, the inability to come to terms with the past; consequently, the writers viewed themselves not just as Vergangenheitsbewältiger but as Gegenwartsbewältiger, since the past served as fuel for the present. And yet, argued Schirmacher, once again showing his attraction to dialectical thinking, this very opposition to both the West German present and the Nazi past, was itself deeply implicated in both. Gruppe 47, far from being outside the mainstream of West German consciousness, had been "one of the production centers of Federal Republican consciousness." Just as Milorad Pavić had suggested in his novel Landscape Painted with Tea, post-war Germany needed a younger generation that bore no responsibility for the Nazi regime and Germany's defeat. It was the sons who had won out over the fathers in Germany. By the end of the 1950s, argued Schirmacher, West German literature had become frozen, and the characters of the writers' novels, far from being merely "literary personnel," had represented West German society itself:

In ihnen entwickelte sich aus dem Schuldigen des Krieges der westdeutsche Zivilisationstyp, in ihnen spricht schon die Stimme, mit der die Öffentlichkeit über sich selber reden wird. Damals entstand das private und öffentliche Bewußtsein Westdeutschlands. Und weil sie diese mythischen Funktionen ausübte, gewann die Literatur der Republik eine religiöse Aura, die schon die behutsame Kritik an den Autoren zum antiintellektuellen Sakrileg machte.

Postwar German authors, Schirmacher contended, had been unable to comprehend themselves simply as literary figures; like Christa Wolf, they had thought of themselves as oracles of historical truth, as the voice of Germany's guilty conscience, as arbiters of morality. Themselves the product of an authoritarian upbringing, they had now become authoritarians in turn, preventing the emergence and flowering of younger generations of German authors who wanted to go beyond a moral-historical coming to terms with the fascist past and thus thwarting the normal course of literary history. Four years earlier, Ernst Nolte had argued that the Nazi past was being kept unhealthily alive by political contentiousness, rendering the normal course of historical revision impossible; now Frank Schirmacher made a similar argument in the realm of a supposedly frozen literary history. Schirmacher's central metaphor was Oskar Mat-
zerath, the diminutive hero of Grass's *Blechtrommel*, who remains frozen in childhood, unable or unwilling to grow up, an ageing youngster; this, argued Schirrmacher, was precisely the situation of West German literature and culture as a whole.

It is one of the many curiosities of the *Literaturstreit* that few of its participants seemed to recognize that Schirrmacher's argument, far from being simply an “attack” on Christa Wolf or even East Germany was, in fact, an “attack” on the Federal Republic itself, which had just seemingly secured a great historical triumph with the arrival of reunification, and on West German authors in particular as representatives of Federal Republican consciousness. Schirrmacher made this “attack” quite explicit, stating unequivocally not only that the literature of the Federal Republic was now at a dead end, but that the “Federal Republic” itself, as a political and spiritual entity, was over. The literature of the Federal Republic, he declared, would be useful for a future cultural archeology as documentation of “a country that no longer exists.”

Given the failure of most of Christa Wolf's West German defenders to recognize or acknowledge what amounted to Schirrmacher's implication of them in his criticism, it is not surprising that their replies also generally failed—like Schirrmacher himself—to acknowledge the origins of the young literaturer's critique of West German cultural production. Those origins lay in the political-aesthetic theories developed by Karl Heinz Bohrer, editor of *Merkur*, in a series of essays and books throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. In his monumental study *Die Ästhetik des Schreckens* (1978), Bohrer had first argued, on the basis of the reception of Ernst Jünger, that West German literary criticism was bedeviled by an ideology that caused specifically literary questions to disappear behind moral and political ones. Bohrer's fascination was directed at the most extreme instances of aesthetic autonomy, which he saw embodied in the aesthetics of evil: in Baudelaire, Flaubert, Rimbaud, Wilde, Jünger. In a series of essays which appeared throughout the 1980s in *Merkur* and were published collectively under the title *Nach der Natur* in 1988, Bohrer developed his argument further, contending that West German literature stood under the sign of a specifically German obsession with goodness and cleanliness. Linking up with Theodor W. Adorno's much-cited declaration that “nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch,” Bohrer argued that Auschwitz as a cultural experience had aggravated an already present German tendency to place the two chief exponents of “uncontrolled imagination” (evil and laughter) under a strict taboo. Hence German literary discourse had become subject to an extraliterary “consciousness of responsibility” (*Verantwortungsdanken*). German literary consciousness had placed specific zones of literary experience under quarantine: specifically the *l'art pour l'art* tradition of French symbolism, aestheticicism, and high European modernism, which Bohrer saw as characterized by a fascination with evil. The role of postwar West German literature, which Bohrer saw embodied in the work of Heinrich Böll, was to tell fairly simple tales of morality from which Germans could learn to correct the errors of their past ways. Böll stood for all West German authors, according to Bohrer:

> Sie alle schreiben seit Jahrzehnten moralisch-politisch engagierte Romane, Erzählungen, deren Funktion vor allem in einer ganz bestimmten, metaphorisch zwar verstellten, aber immer sofort erkennbaren Form der sächsischen Erbauung liegt.

Long before Schirrmacher argued that Christa Wolf's popularity in West Germany could be attributed to the generalized German secularization morality of the “Protestant parish house,” Bohrer had already made substantially similar claims, coupling his critique of West German literary history and its “permanent theodicy” with a vicious and perceptive attack on all of West German political culture as well. For Bohrer, the “permanent theodicy” in West German literature was a function of what Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich had famously referred to as the “inability to mourn,” from which sprang, on the one hand, a literary culture unwilling to recognize specifically aesthetic problems and, on the other hand, a political culture characterized by-ashiness, ugliness, and provincialism. It was precisely this two-pronged critique, which attacked both Helmut Kohl and Heinrich Böll as representatives of the same cultural-political milieu, that made it difficult to assert that Bohrer was simply a conservative stooge trying to erase West German writers' critical attempts to come to terms with the fascist past and, hence, to achieve a new and unhealthy “normality.”

With this history of criticism of the Federal Republic and its literature, Karl Heinz Bohrer's response to the collapse of the GDR was two-fold. In a much-discussed essay entitled “Warum wir keine Nation sind,” published at the beginning of 1990 in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, Bohrer welcomed reunification far more as the end of the Federal Republic than as the end of the GDR. Unification, Bohrer argued, might ultimately mean the end of the provincialism and lack of aesthetic sensibility he associated with the Federal Republic. In another essay in *Merkur* entitled “Die Ästhetik am Ausgang ihrer Unmündigkeit,” Bohrer reaffirmed his fascination with aesthetic autonomy, declaring that the history of aesthetics was the history of art's “self-liberation” from the paternalist authoritarianism represented by theology, metaphysics, morality, and idealism. Precisely because of its freedom from politics and morality, Bohrer argued, aesthetic theory was the “real theory of our age.” On the other hand, Bohrer continued to warn that unification did not automat-
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Nevertheless, in spite of these seemingly clear-cut distinctions, there was a good deal more subtlety to these two debates than immediately met the eye. In the Historikerstreit, it was not just the “right” that argued for a historicization and demythologization of fascism; nor was it just the “right,” in the Literaturstreit, that argued for an aestheticization of art. The arguments of Karl Heinz Bohrer linked up to a long tradition of autonomous aesthetic theory in Germany, from Friedrich Schlegel to Theodor W. Adorno. Given the literary nature of this debate, it was remarkable how few of the participants in the Literaturstreit seemed to recognize that they were part of the oldest and most important aesthetic disagreement: the battle over the autonomy of art. As the example of Adorno shows, it was never simply the right wing in Germany which took up the autonomous position. Nor was it simply the right wing now. Antonia Grunenberg wrote in Kommune that she suspected the defense of “engaged” art to be implicated in an attempt to save what was left of the German “Sonntags-“ after its collapse, and she asked why there was so little ironic distancing in the German debate. In spite of his criticism of Greiner and Schirrmacher, Wolf Biermann acknowledged the validity of the guilt question as it pertained to writers, and, like Grunenberg, he argued for more humor and irony in the discussion. Günter Kunert added his voice to those acknowledging the need for literary self-criticism. And Kurt Drawert, one of the most important and gifted young poets of the former GDR, declared that the younger generation of GDR writers had seen in aesthetic “nondiscursivity” precisely a refusal to be coopted either by an authoritarian politics or by a repressive culture industry. Given Drawert’s and Schirrmacher’s age (both in their thirties), it was entirely possible that the split between “right” and “left” in the Literaturstreit was just as much a split between a younger and an older generation of literateurs, with the older generation insisting on a continued Vergangenheitsbewältigung and the younger generation insisting on its own “Gnade der späten Geburt” (Helmut Kohl).

In conclusion, it is perhaps instructive to return to Günter Grass, who remained at the center not only of the Literaturstreit in his vehement defense of Christa Wolf and an “engaged” literature, but of the reunification debate itself. Grass, whom Schirrmacher had seen as the quintessential representative of Federal Republican literature, showed extraordinary public activity throughout 1989 and 1990, writing many articles and delivering many speeches against reunification. He clearly saw himself as the conscience of the nation. In February of 1990, Grass was chosen to deliver the annual Frankurt lecture on poetry, in which he declared, just as Schirrmacher was later to argue, that Vergangenheitsbewältigung was or should be the ultimate aim not only of his own literary production but of all of German literature as well. Like Bohrer, he drew
explicitly on the Adornian injunction about the barbarity of poetry after Auschwitz, but while Bohrer had extrapolated from this injunction to the autonomy of art, Grass drew the opposite conclusion, declaring that after Auschwitz Germans finally knew who they truly were and must never forget this lesson. Art should remind them.44

But in the novel which he declared was closest to his own heart, Grass had, almost thirty years earlier, already demonstrated the difficulty of drawing simple lessons from history. In **Hundeadende** it is, ironically, the persecuted Jew Eddi Amsel who mockingly dismisses the concept of literature as a morality tale, declaring that his own story is nothing but a “Geschichtchen, das Sie in jedem deutschen Lesebuch finden können. Moralisch und leicht zu behalten.”45 It is not the victim but the perpetrator, former SA man Walter Matern, who counts:


Amsel replies ironically, “auch meine Lesebuchgeschichte ist, obgleich durchaus moralisch und leicht zu behalten, gleichfalls eine Lügengeschichte.” By having the SA man Matern argue for **Vergangenheitsbewältigung** and the Jewish victim Amsel argue for the ambivalence of all artistic creation, Grass has already undercut his own certainties of thirty years later. It behooves us to learn this lesson and understand the **Literaturstreit**, too, not as a black-and-white polarity but as a spectrum of uncertainties.

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2There have been a number of good accounts in English of the **Historikerstreit**. See especially Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988); Richard J. Evans, *In Hitler’s Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past* (New York: Pantheon, 1989); and the special issue on the **Historikerstreit** published by *New German Critique*, no.44, spring/summer 1988.


4Frank Schirrmacher, “‘**Dem Druck des härteren, strengerer Lebens standhalten’: Auch eine Studie über den autoritären Charakter Christa Wolfs Aufsätze, Reden und ihre jüngste Erzählung Was bleibt’,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 June 1990, in the non-paginated glossy insert *Bilder und Zeiten*. This essay and the other crucial contributions to the **Literaturstreit** have now been collected in: Thomas Anz, ed., “*Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf! Der Literaturstreit im vereinigten Deutschland* (München: Spangenberg, 1991).

The Crisis of East German Socialism: Christa Wolf and the Critique of Economic Rationality

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Wir mochten ihn nicht, diesen Kapitalismus mit seiner sozialen Ungerechtigkeit, mit seinen perfekten Mechanismen, mit seiner rücksichtslosen Effektivität.  
—Helga Königsdorf

As the mass media reported the disintegration of Eastern European socialism and either triumphantly predicted the reunification of Germany and the demise of the German Democratic Republic, or else projected terrifying images of a potential “Fourth Reich” emerging from a reunified Germany, research on literary and cultural developments in the GDR became both more difficult and more urgent. Faced with the need to see past the superficial exultation as well as the dire predictions offered periodically, the researcher who wishes to consider the implications of recent events must also reflect on the manner in which they have been publicized. And a careful consideration of the rapidly changing scenario offered by German-German relations must also be counterbalanced by informed reflection on the changing quality of life within that part of Germany that for forty years called itself the German Democratic Republic.

Perhaps even more challenging but equally essential for the researcher whose familiarity with East Germany is limited by cultural and ideological factors is the task of self-reflection. Once the province of both Marxist intellectuals and cold warriors in this country, the study of literary and cultural life in East Germany may now require redefinition, as the political entity of the GDR is passing into history. Many of the questions about convergences and divergences in the cultures of the two German states become mere historical curiosities, whereas others may take on new significance in a changing reality.

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