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German Literature, Year Zero: Writers and Politics, 1945–1953

Stephen Brockmann

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."[1] 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.'"[2] 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."[3] 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

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[1] Milorad Pavic, *Landscape Painted with Tea* (New York, 1990), 41.

[2] Ernst Nolte, "Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will. Eine Rede, die geschrieben, aber nicht gehalten werden konnte," in *"Historikerrstreit". Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung* (Munich, 1987), 39–47; here, 41.

[3] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of lnfuence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York, 1973).

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.[4]

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 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 in 1946. 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 younger generation knows this only intuitively, but it knows.[5]

Richter's specific declaration that the silence of the younger generation was *not* a result of having nothing to say or being "clueless" (*ratlos*) 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.

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[4] Alfred Andersch, "Notwendige Aussage zum Nürnberger Prozeß," *Der Ruf* 1, no. 1 (Aug. 1946); reprinted in *Der Ruf. Eine deutsche Nachkriegszeitschrift*, ed. Hans Schwab-Felisch (Munich, 1962), 26–29.

[5] Hans Werner Richter, "Warum schweigt die junge Generation?" *Der Ruf* 1, no. 2 (1 Sept 1946), reprinted in Schwab-Felisch, ed., *Der Ruf*, 29–33.

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 book *The German Catastrophe*, published in 1946, that it might never be possible to understand fully 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."[6]

But Richter tried to make a virtue out of what seemed an unpleasant necessity. He painted a picture of radical 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 that have become a part of and that 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.[7]

While Richter's words are noteworthy for the radicalness of their intention to break with tradition, it is significant that he made no attempt to describe precisely how such a break can be accomplished, let alone to address the question of whether a beginning ex nihilo is humanly possible.

Three years later Alfred Andersch, born in 1914, declared:

> Because of the dictates of a completely unprecedented situation, the younger generation stands before a tabula rasa, before the necessity of

[6] Friedrich Meinecke, *Die deutsche Katastrophe* (Wiesbaden, 1946), 5, cited by Wolfgang Benz, "Wissenschaft oder Alibi? Die Etablierung der Zeitgeschichte," in *Wissenschaft im geteilten Deutschland*, ed. Walter H. Pehle and Peter Sillem (Frankfurt, 1992),11.

[7] Schwab-Felisch, ed., *Der Ruf*, 29–33.

> achieving through an original act of creation, a renewal of German spiritual life.[8]

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.[9]

Such statements certainly underline the intention of a younger generation to break with its predecessors and the past they represented. Words such as *Zwang* (compulsion) 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 Eric Kuby said, "We did not choose to live in this era. We have to deal with it as we have found it."[10] 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.[11]

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 and vague.

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[8] Alfred Andersch, *Deutsche Literatur in der Entscheidung. Ein Beitrag Zur Analyse der literarischen Situation* (Karlsruhe, n.d. [1948]), 24.

[9] Ibid., 25.

[10] Alexander Parlach (Erich Kuby), "Die erste und einzige Rede deutscher Jugend an ihren Dichter," *Der Ruf* 2, no. 25: 10; cited in *Auf der Suche nach der Stunde Null. Literature und Alltag 1945* (Bad Salzdetfurth, 1991), 20.

[11] Uwe Schultz, ed., *Fünfzehn Autoren suchen sich selbst. Modell und Provokation* (Munich, 1967), 27, cited in Frank Trommler, "Der zögernde Nachwuchs. Entwicklungsprobleme der Nachkriegsliteratur in West und Ost," in *Tendenzen der deutschen Literatur seit 1945*, ed. Thomas Koebner (Stuttgart 1971),1–116; here, 13.

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 home town 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. But these things have become 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"—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 not only by the broken-off words "Stranger, Bear Word to the Spartans We ..." but also by "busts of Caesar, Cicero, and Marcus Aurelius"[12] and a 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 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?[13]

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 tradi-

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[12] Heinrich Böll, "Stranger, Bear Word to the Spartans We ...," in *The Stories of Heinrich Böll*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York, 1986), 271.

[13] Ibid., 272.

tion 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.[14]

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.

From the very beginning, the zero hour of 1945 stood under the sign of both necessity and failure. It was 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. In 1947, one year before the West German currency reform, the journalist Eugen Kogon 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.[15]

One year after Kogon wrote these words, an opinion poll gave drastic confirmation of his evaluation by suggesting that 57 percent of Germans living in the Western occupation zones believed that National Socialism was "a good idea that was only carried out wrong."[16] 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 re-creation of well-known interests as much as possible, a politics of lack of imagination."[17] Summing up the restoration almost two decades later, Kogon used words

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[14] Ibid., 276.

[15] Eugen Kogon, *Die unvollendete Erneuerung. Deutschland im Kräftefeld 1945–1963* (Frankfurt,1964), 65.

[16] As cited by Jürgen Kocka, "Zerstörung und Befreiung. Das Jahr 1945 als Wendepunkt deutscher Geschichte," in idem, *Geschichte und Aufklärung* (Göttingen, 1989),120–39, here 127.

[17] Kogon, *Die unvollendete Erneuerung*, 146–47.

strikingly similar to those later adopted by literary critics 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."[18]

Similar feelings had been expressed by many others, including the journalist Walter Dirks. Dirks was already writing about what he called "the restorative character of the epoch" in 1950, suggesting that "the re-creation of the old world has occurred with such force that all we can do right now is accept it as a fact of life."[19] 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 tradition even in the face of the disaster of 1945, as well as in the Group 47 writers' opposition 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."[20] In 1950 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."[21]

The 1946 Nobel Prize for literature went to a German-speaking writer, but not to a member of the younger generation. Instead it went to Hermann Hesse, born only a year after Konrad Adenauer, in 1887, already middle aged by the end of World War I and quite old by the end of World War II. Hesse, who had become a Swiss citizen as early as 1923, had published his last major novel, *The Glass Bead Game*, in 1943, and this book became the most significant work of epic literature to appear in the German language during the 1940s, along with Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* (1947) and Hermann Broch's *The Death of Vergil* (1945). In an analysis of the

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[18] Ibid., 5.

[19] Walter Dirks, "Der restaurative Charakter der Epoche," *Frankfurter Hefte* 5, no. 9 (1950): 942–54; here 942.

[20] Cited in Trommler, "Der zögernde Nachwuchs," 7.

[21] Cited in Keith Bullivant, *The Future of German Literature* (Providence, R.I., 1994), 102, from Alfred Kantorowicz, *Deutsches Tagebuch*, vol. 1 (Munich, 1978), 647.

situation of literature in postwar Germany, Alfred Andersch in 1948 declared that through their masterpieces these three authors had proven "Germany's belonging [*Zugehörigkeit*] to Atlantic culture."[22] And yet all of these authors were members of the older generation, with Mann born in 1875 and Broch in 1886.

Far from being a literary work that comes to terms with Nazism, Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* is a celebration of pure, apolitical intellectualism, of withdrawal from the world and monkish existence. The game of the book's title is an exclusively mental exercise, a "highly developed secret language"[23] combining theology, music, and mathematics with no bearing whatsoever on the actual affairs of the world. As the book's narrator describes it, the game seeks to avoid anything negative and, through playful combinations, to achieve communion with God:

> In general, aside from certain brilliant exceptions, Games with discordant, negative, or skeptical conclusions were unpopular and at times actually forbidden. This followed directly from the meaning the Game had acquired at its height for the players. It represented an elite, symbolic form of seeking for perfection, a sublime alchemy, an approach to that Mind which beyond all images and multiplicities is one within itself—in other words, to God.[24]

This passage is an adequate description not only of Hesse's *Glass Bead Game* but of the role of literature itself in German cultural conservatism. The entire plot of Hesse's chef d'oeuvre takes place in a kind of fairy-tale world, a country called "Kastalien" in which neither Nazis nor Communists ever rear their heads, and in which any political involvement is decried as *feuilletonistisch* or "literary supplement punditry." Indeed, the *Glass Bead Game* itself is invented partially as a reaction against intellectuals' involvement with politics in "the era of literary supplement punditry" (*das feuilletonistische Zeitalter*), an era that "did not really know what to do with its spirit, or, more precisely, did not know how to give the spirit the place and function it deserves."[25]

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[22] Andersch, *Deutsche Literatur*, 18.

[23] Hermann Hesse, *Magister Ludi (The Glass Bead Game)*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York, 1970), 6.

[24] Ibid., 30.

[25] Hermann Hesse, *Gesammelte Dichtungen*, vol. 6 (Frankfurt, 1958), 87–88. For an alternative English translation, see Hesse, *Magister Ludi*, 9.

While it is certainly understandable that, in a period of "uncertainty and falsehood" in which intellectuals "suddenly found" themselves "confronted with nothingness,"[26] Hermann Hesse preferred to flee from an unpleasant reality in his writings of the Nazi period, his 1943 novel is more a summary of previous themes than a new beginning. Hesse himself seems to acknowledge his own weakness and inability to come to terms with the present by ending the novel with the death of its main character, the aptly named Joseph Knecht, who, while trying to keep up with a teenage pupil in a swimming match, has a heart attack and drowns. As the young pupil realizes that his master, the incarnation of the Glass Bead Game and hence of pure intellectualism, has died, he also comes to understand that he himself is partially guilty for this death:

> And because, in spite of all arguments to the contrary, he felt himself to be partially guilty of his master's death, he was overcome with the holy terror of presentiment and knew that this guilt would change him and his life and demand far greater things from him than he had ever demanded from himself. [27]

While this ending might justifiably be read as the signal of the inevitable death of an older generation and the ambiguous triumph of a younger, stronger generation that must now face the grim burden of its own victory, the younger generation immediately after the war was in no way as strong or as healthy as such an interpretation would suggest. On the contrary, the younger generation was, by its own admission, silent. One of the saddest events in postwar German literature occurred in 1949, in the middle of Thomas Mann's worldwide fame and adulation as a result of the publication of *Doktor Faustus*. the suicide of Mann's highly talented son Klaus, who had earlier had such hopes for a new Germany that would need what the younger Mann, in his exile novel *Der Vulkan* (the volcano), had called "people like us."[28] Klaus Mann's depression had been caused at least in part by bitter disappointment about the state of affairs in postwar Germany.

If Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, and Hermann Broch dominated the immediate postwar period in terms of respected literary production, they

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[26] Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 6, 93. In the Winston translation, "they found themselves suddenly confronting a void." Hesse, *Magister Ludi*, 14.

[27] Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke*, 543. In the Winston translation, *Magister Ludi*, 394.

[28] Klaus Mann, *Der Vulkan. Roman unter Emigranten* (Amsterdam, 1939), 718.

were not the only members of the older generation to be so productive. The dominant literary figure in West Germany throughout the 1950s was not a member of the younger generation but rather the poet Gottfried Benn, who was born, along with Konrad Adenauer and Hermann Broch, in 1886, and whose *Statische Gedichte* had been published in 1948. In philosophy the dominant figures were Martin Heidegger (born in the same year as Hitler, 1889) and, to a lesser extent, Karl Jaspers (born in 1883). Throughout the 1950s it was an apolitical existentialism, not political engagement or coming to terms with the past, that dominated literary production. "But that is politics, that is poppycock!" declares one German *Bildungsbürger* to another in a satirical story by Franz Fühmann about the postwar period. Surrounded by bookshelves filled with the literary celebrities of the 1950s—T.S. Eliot, Albert Camus, Ezra Pound, Rudolf Binding, and Ernst Jünger—this character is expressing a typical flight from difficult political and social questions toward universal, timeless, existentialist vagueness. Advising his friend to steer clear of politics, the Soviet zone, and questions about the past, this *homme de lettres*, who sits comfortably in West Berlin sipping Nescafé while rhapsodizing in Heideggerian terms about the universal, suggests that a young postwar writer should return to the Middle Ages:

> "Do you know what, you ought to write a dance of death, that would be just your style, a terrible, demonic dance of death that would grasp the whole apocalypse of our time," he said and drank his Nescafé to the bottom, "the whole apocalypse," he repeated and put his cup back, "the aloneness of the human creature, the despair, the remorselessness, the thrust-outness [*Geworfensein*]..." He wiped the whipped cream from his mouth.[29]

In an address to the German people in 1945, the writer Franz Werfel had advised Germans, "Think back with humility and gratefulness to your great and holy masters, who will be your witnesses in eternity. Only they can take the shame away from you..."[30] To think back to the great masters, especially to Goethe—this was for many the lesson of World War II. Not a zero hour, in other words, but rather a return to eternal verities.

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[29] Fühmann, *Das Judenauto* (1962; 2d ed. Leipzig, 1987),159–60.

[30] Franz Werfel, "An das deutsche Volk," *Bayerische Landeszeitung*, 25 May 1945, reprinted in Bernhard Zeller, ed., *"Als der Krieg zu Ende war". Literarisch-politische Publizistik 1945–1950* (Munich, 1973), 24.

Thus Meinecke proposed dealing with the moral catastrophe of German fascism by establishing cells of Goethe admirers throughout the country,[31] while in Frankfurt city fathers responded to the destruction of their city and of Goethe's house itself with a very literal reconstruction and restoration of the house, as if it had never been destroyed. In spite of critics' complaints that such a restoration amounted to nothing less than a falsification and a lie that would prevent Germans from recognizing the extent of their moral and cultural catastrophe, Frankfurt's city fathers insisted on the reconstruction.[32] One of the first major intellectual debates in Germany after the war was the debate between Karl Jaspers and Ernst Robert Curtius about Goethe's role in contemporary German culture, in which Jaspers dared to question Goethe's continuing significance, while the outraged Curtius denounced such questioning as "an attack on Goethe that is both subaltern and arrogant," amounting to an attack on German culture itself.[33]

Many German intellectuals seemed insistent on behaving as if Hitler, the Third Reich, and the Holocaust had never happened. It has been well documented that most fields of humanistic scholarship—from philosophy, sociology, and literary studies to history itself—followed more or less the same traditions they had before 1945, only eliminating specifically Nazi ideology. Suggesting that "the facts are as clear as they are unbelievable," the philosopher Helmut Fahrenbach has described the immediate postwar situation in philosophy as an almost willful failure to address the major problems posed by recent German history—"as if nothing had happened."[34] As

[31] Jost Hermand, *Kultur im Wiederaufbau. Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1945–1965* (Frankfurt, 1989), 71; Trommler, "Der zögernde Nachwuchs," 10; Anton Kaes, "Literatur und nationale Identität. Kontroversen um Goethe 1945–49," in *Kontroversen, alte und neue. Akten des VII. Internationalen Germanisten-Kongresses* 10, ed. Albrecht Schöne (Tübingen, 1986), 199–206; and Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 13.

[32] Bettina Meier, "Goethe in Trümmern. Der Streit um den Wiederaufbau des Goethehauses in Frankfurt," in Jochen Vogt, *"Erinnerung ist unsere Aufgabe". Über Literatur, Moral und Politik 1945–1960* (Opladen, 1991), 28–40. See also Klaus Schwab, "Zum Goethe-Kult," in *Zur literarischen Situation 1945–1949*, ed. Gerhard Hay (Kronberg, 1977), 240–51.

[33] Cited in Zeller, ed., *"Als der Krieg zu Ende war,"* 498.

[34] Helmut Fahrenbach, "Nationalsozialismus und der Neuanfang 'westdeutscher Philosophie' 1945–1950," in Pehle and Sillem, eds., *Wissenschaft im geteilten Deutschland*, 109–10.

Hannah Arendt remarked when she visited Germany in 1950, "everywhere one notices that there is no reaction to what has happened, but it is hard to say whether that is due to an intentional refusal to mourn or whether it is the expression of a genuine emotional incapacity."[35] The writer Stefan Heym noted in October 1945 that "the ability to stick one's head in the sand and close oneself off from unpleasant facts is a protective mechanism of the human soul."[36] In anger at this behavior Bertolt Brecht spoke of Germans' "good-natured cluelessness, the shamelessness, that they were simply continuing on as if it were only their houses that had been destroyed."[37] As Theodor W. Adorno wrote in the journal *Frankfurter Hefte* in 1950, "the word has not yet gotten out that culture in the traditional sense of the word is dead."[38]

Once again it was the writer Heinrich Böll who was able to capture this ostrich-like behavior most memorably in his satirical short story "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" ("Nicht nur zur Weihnachtszeit"), in which the primary psychological effect of World War II and its brutal interruption of the traditional German family Christmas ceremony on the narrator's aunt is her inability to accept the fact that "Christmas comes but once a year." As the narrator reflects, "the war was registered by my Aunt Milla merely as a force that began as early as Christmas 1939 to jeopardize her Christmas tree."[39] As a result of this trauma, Aunt Milla becomes obsessed with restoring the Christmas ceremony exactly as she remembered it from before the war. She cannot let Christmas come to an end. If the Christmas tree is taken away she becomes hysterical. And because of Aunt Milla's refusal to accept the reality of time, her entire family begins an elaborate ritual, celebrating Christmas 365 times a year, decorating Christmas trees and consuming

[35] Cited in Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat*, 83, from Hannah Arendt, "Besuch in Deutschland 1950," in *Zur Zeit. Polnische Essays* (Berlin, 1986), 44.

[36] Cited in Zeller, ed., *"Als der Krieg zu Ende war,"* 28.

[37] Max Frisch, *Erinnerungen an Brecht* (Berlin, 1968), 14; cited by Frank Trommler, "Emigration und Nachkriegsliteratur. Zum Problem der geschichtlichen Kontinuität," in *Exil und innere Emigration*, ed. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (Frankfurt, 1972),173–97; here, 173.

[38] Theodor W. Adorno, "Auferstehung der Kultur in Deutschland?" in Adorno, *Kritik. Kleine Schriften Zur Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt, 1971), 20–33; here, 23.

[39] Heinrich Böll, "Christmas Not Just Once a Year," in *Stories of Heinrich Böll*, 421.

Christmas candy at an alarming rate. Gradually this mendacious ritual begins to erode the basis for family life completely.

Aunt Milla is the satirically exaggerated representative of a society incapable of recognizing what has happened to it, and the family's elaborate ceremonies echo a world in which economic power is used to create a lying facade behind which the truth is safely hidden.[40] For Heinrich Böll the primary moral task of any writer and any human being was to face reality, not to hide from it. He wrote, "Reality is like a letter that is addressed to us, but which we allow to lie around unopened." Failure to face reality is fatal, according to Böll, because human beings can live only in reality or not at all.[41]

Despite the dominance of an apolitical worship of traditional culture immediately after World War II, many representatives of the younger generation sought a thoroughgoing politicization of literature that would break the old German separation between *Geist* and *Macht.* 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." Pirker suggested 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."[42]

Similarly, Erich von Kahler suggested that, "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'."[43]

The belief that literature should become political 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 also argued against the aesthetic solipsism of a literature unconcerned with human

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[40] Bernd Balzer, "Heinrich Bölls Werke. Anarchie und Zärtlichkeit," in Heinrich Böll, *Werke. Romane und Erzählungen I: 1947–1952* (Cologne, 1987), [11]–[187]; here [41].

[41] Heinrich Böll, "Der Zeitgenosse und die Wirklichkeit," in idem, *Erzählungen Hörspiele Aufsätze* (Cologne, 1961), 344–48.

[42] Cited in Hay, ed., *Zur literarischen Situation*, 8.

[43] Cited in Ulrike Gollnick, "Thomas Mann. Repräsentant der Nachkriegszeit?" in Hay, ed., *Zur literarischen Situation*, 207.

reality in his first major postwar essay, "In Praise of Rubble Literature" from 1952, in which he called such aesthetic solipsism the work of the "blindman's-buff writer" (*Blindekuh-Schriftsteller*), who, instead of reflecting human reality in his work, tries to create with his work a new reality. "The blindman'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*.[44] In suggesting this notion, Böll was clearly connecting pure aestheticism in its German incarnation with National Socialism.

At the time, this viewpoint represented a minority position. And yet by the time of his death in 1985, Böll had not only won the Nobel Prize but also had become, in a sense, the widely recognized conscience of his nation. What in 1952 had been a minority opinion was, by the mid-1980s, increasingly dominant.

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.[45] Their scholarly deconstruction of the zero-hour myth, which is now widely accepted by literary historians, demonstrated clearly that the year 1945 was characterized at least as much by literary continuity as by a tabula rasa. In Trommler's analysis, 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

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[44] Heinrich Böll, "Bekenntnis zur Trümmerliteratur," in idem, *Erzählungen Hörspiele Aufsätze*, 339–43; here, 342.

[45] See the following articles by Frank Trommler. "Der 'Nullpunkt 1945' und seine Verbindlichkeit für die Literaturgeschichte," *Basis. Jahrbuch für deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur* 1 (1970): 9–25; "Der zögernde Nachwuchs"; "Emigration und Nachkriegsliteratur"; "Nachkriegsliteratur. Eine neue deutsche Literatur?" *Literaturmagazin* 7 (1977): 167–86. See also Hans Dieter Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewußtsein. Über deutsche Kultur und Lebenswirklichkeit 1933–1945* (Munich, 1981), particularly the chapter "Zur Periodisierung der deutschen Literatur seit 1930," 55–71. For a recent reassessment, see Bullivant, *Future of German Literature*.

some internal literary dynamic, but rather as the product 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.[46] The dispute between the two groups of critics revolves less around the facts of the German political and literary situation than around the interpretation of the relative independence of literary and aesthetic phenomena from political phenomena.

If the year 1945 was indeed not a zero hour, 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? When did the National Socialist Germany become the democratic Germany that Germans and others know today? What was the role of literature and literary intellectuals in helping to create such a Germany? And why is it that a concept unknown in 1945 and rejected by most serious scholars today enjoys such dominance among ordinary Germans as they reflect on the significance of the year 1945?

These are questions that are far too large and complex to answer within the space of a brief essay. But the possible contours of an answer are, I would submit, suggested by the work and career of Heinrich Böll, the literary outsider of the 1940s and early 1950s who was to become a lionized leader of German letters by the time of his death. Böll and other writers like him insisted during the first postwar years on the importance of a simple, unadorned, politically engaged, realist literature that would break with an unpolitical literary tradition that they believed to be partly responsible for the susceptibility of German *Bildungsbürger* to the Nazi Party. These writers and their *Trümmerliteratur* were a marginal, minority phenomenon during the first decade of their ascension, but ultimately the "zero hour" consciousness that they represented came to dominate the literature of the Federal Republic. At the moment of German reunification in 1990, in fact, even a con-

[46] David Roberts, "Nach der Apokalypse. Kontinuität und Diskontinuität in der deutschen Literatur nach 1945," in Bernd Hüppauf, *"Die Mühen der Ebenen". Kontinuität und Wandel in der deutschen Literatur und Gesellschaft 1945–1949* (Heidelberg, 1981), 21–45. See also Hüppauf's article in the same volume, "Krise ohne Wandel. Die kulturelle Situation 1945–1949," 47–112.

servative critic had to admit that the literature they produced was the "production center of West German consciousness"—the most important factor in helping to create a democratic, pluralistic political consciousness in Germany.[47] Hence, while one must accept the fact that the "zero hour" is more a literary historical myth than a reality, one must also accept the fact that this myth has acquired increasing significance during the postwar years and has, precisely for that reason, taken on a certain stubborn reality of its own—in the present, if not in the past.

The functioning of that zero hour myth is once again perhaps best illustrated in one of Böll's first postwar short stories, the 1947 anecdote "The Message," in which the story's narrator speaks 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."[48] Such a statement prefigures the continuing and even increasing significance of World War II and the Nazi dictatorship in postwar German consciousness and seems to anticipate Nolte's complaint in 1986 that as the past recedes, its political significance continues, paradoxically, to grow: "It seems to be getting stronger and more alive all the time ..., as a past that has in fact established itself as a present, and that hangs above the present like a sword of judgment."[49] Debates in the 1990s about Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* and about the controversial traveling exhibit on the crimes of the German *Wehrmacht*, as well as many other discussions and arguments about the German past, suggest that Nolte's mid-1980s statement continues to be pertinent into the late 1990s. Nolte is no doubt correct in his evaluation of the vital significance of the German past for the German present, but there is no reason to share Nolte's negative assessment of that significance. On the contrary, it is probable that the "stronger and more alive" past of which Nolte speaks has contributed substantially to the stabilization and success of postwar German democracy. The zero hour that did not occur in 1945 has become a positive fact of German consciousness half a century later.

[47] Frank Schirrmacher, "Abschied von der Literatur der Bundesrepublik," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 Oct. 1990, L1 –2.

[48] Heinrich Böll, "Die Botschaft," in idem, *Werke*, vol. I, 30–35; here, 33.

[49] Nolte, "Vergangenheit," 39.