

GERMAN CULTURE AT THE “ZERO HOUR”

Stephen Brockmann

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

Kristijana Gunnars¹

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Origins of the Term “Zero Hour”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A German Generation Gap?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Richter concluded,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Failure of the “Zero Hour”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Literature, Politics, and the Zero Hour

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Continuing Zero Hour?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ENDNOTES

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

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3. Franz Werfel, “An das deutsche Volk,” *Bayerische Landeszeitung*, 25 May 1945, reprinted in “*Als der Krieg zu Ende war*,” p. 24.

4. Ernst Wiechert, *Rede an die Deutsche Jugend 1945* (Munich: Zinnen, 1945), p. 33—cited in *Auf der Suche nach der Stunde Null: Literatur und Alltag 1945* (Bad Salzdetfurth: Barbara Franzbecker, 1991), p. 20.

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

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

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

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

9. Walter Kolbenhoff, *Von unserem Fleisch und Blut* (Munich: Nymphenburger, 1946), p. 86.

- ¹⁰. Alfred Andersch, *Deutsche Literatur in der Entscheidung: Ein Beitrag zur Analyse der literarischen Situation* (Karlsruhe: Volk und Zeit, n.d. [1948]), p. 5.
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- ¹². Letter from Erika Keiper, November 29, 1994.
- ¹³. Letter from Helmut Burmeister, December 20, 1994.
- ¹⁴. Stephen Vincent Benét, Erika Mann, et. al., *Zero Hour: A Summons to the Free* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1940), p. 76.
- ¹⁵. Richard Freund, *Zero Hour: Policies of the Powers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), pp. 1 and 251.
- ¹⁶. Karl Becker, *Zero Hour for Germany* (London: I.N.G. Publications, 1944), p. 72. "I.N.G." stands for "Inside Nazi Germany."
- ¹⁷. Becker, p. 72.
- ¹⁸. *The Signs of Awakening: German Underground Speaks: The Peace Manifesto of the Rhineland Conference* (New York: German American, 1943), pp. 25, 19.
- ¹⁹. Samuel Grafton, *Let Germany Earn the Peace* (New York: New York Post, 1945), p. 11.
- ²⁰. Grafton, p. 23.
- ²¹. Grafton, p. 5.
- ²². Grafton, p. 23.
- ²³. Erika and Klaus Mann, *The Other Germany* (New York: Modern Age, 1940), p. xi.
- ²⁴. Klaus Mann, *Der Vulkan: Roman unter Emigranten* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1939), p. 718.
- ²⁵. Milorad Pavic, *Landscape Painted with Tea* (New York: Knopf, 1990), p. 41.
- ²⁶. Ernst Nolte, "Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will: Eine Rede, die geschrieben, aber nicht gehalten werden konnte," in "*Historikerstreit: Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung*" (Munich: Piper, 1987), pp. 39-47; here, p. 41.

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- ²⁹. Friedrich Meinecke, *Die deutsche Katastrophe: Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen* (Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1946), p. 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: Fischer, 1992), p. 11.
- ³⁰. Hans Werner Richter, "Warum schweigt die junge Generation?" in *Der Ruf*, v. 1, no. 2, September 1, 1946, reprinted in Schwab-Felisch, pp. 29-33.
- ³¹. Alfred Andersch, *Deutsche Literatur in der Entscheidung*, p. 24.
- ³². *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- ³³. 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: Kröner, 1971), pp. 1-116; here, p. 13.
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- ³⁵. *Ibid.*, p. 272.
- ³⁶. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
- ³⁷. Joseph Goebbels, *Michael*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Amok, 1987), first published in Germany in 1929.
- ³⁸. Renate Finckh, *Mit uns zieht die neue Zeit* (Baden-Baden: Signal, 1979), p. 177.
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- ⁴¹. Kolbenhoff, p. 160.
- ⁴². *Ibid.*, pp. 170, 180, 147.

⁴³. Ibid., p. 21.

⁴⁴. Ibid., p. 60.

⁴⁵. Finckh, p. 183.

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

⁴⁷. Weiss, *Fluchtpunkt*, p. 13, cited in Vogt, p. 22.

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

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

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⁵⁵. Kogon, pp. 146-147.

⁵⁶. Ibid., p. 5.

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⁵⁸. Cited in Frank Trommler, "Der zögernde Nachwuchs," p. 7.

- ⁵⁹. Cited in Keith Bullivant, *The Future of German Literature* (Providence: Berg, 1994), p. 102, from Alfred Kantorowicz, *Deutsches Tagebuch*, v. 1 (Munich: Kindler, 1978), p. 647.
- ⁶⁰. See the following articles by Frank Trommler: “Der ‘Nullpunkt 1945’ und seine Verbindlichkeit für die Literaturgeschichte,” *Basis: Jahrbuch für deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur* I (1970), pp. 9-25; “Der zögernde Nachwuchs,” op. cit.; “Emigration und Nachkriegsliteratur: Zum Problem der geschichtlichen Kontinuität,” in *Exil und innere Emigration*, ed. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1972), pp. 173-197; “Nachkriegsliteratur—eine neue deutsche Literatur?” *Literaturmagazin* 7 (1977), pp. 167-186. See also Hans Dieter Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewußtsein: Über deutsche Kultur und Lebenswirklichkeit 1933-1945* (Munich: Hanser, 1981), particularly the chapter “Zur Periodisierung der deutschen Literatur seit 1930,” pp. 55-71. For a recent reassessment, see Bullivant, *The Future of German Literature*, op. cit.
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- ⁶². Cited in *Zur literarischen Situation 1945-1949*, ed. Gerhard Hay (Kronberg: Athenäum, 1977), p. 8.
- ⁶³. Ulrike Gollnick, “Thomas Mann—Repräsentant der Nachkriegszeit?” in *Zur literarischen Situation 1945-1949*, p. 207.
- ⁶⁴. Heinrich Böll, “Bekenntnis zur Trümmerliteratur,” in *Erzählungen Hörspiele Aufsätze* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1961), pp. 339-343; here, p. 342.
- ⁶⁵. Peter Handke, *Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972).
- ⁶⁶. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern: Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens* (Munich: Piper, 1967), p. 57.
- ⁶⁷. Walter Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” in *Allegorien kultureller Erfahrung: Ausgewählte Schriften 1920-1940* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1984), p. 160.
- ⁶⁸. Uwe Johnson, *Jahrestage*, v. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 45.
- ⁶⁹. Jochen Vogt, “*Erinnerung ist unsere Aufgabe: Über Literatur, Moral und Politik 1945-1990* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1991) p. 12.
- ⁷⁰. Andersch, *Deutsche Literatur in der Entscheidung*, p. 25.

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁷⁷. Gerd Rädcl (see note 8).

⁷⁸. Helmut Burmeister (see note 13).

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

⁸⁰. Nolte (note 26), p. 39.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁸⁹. *Ibid.*, p. 26.