and Vienna, he has worked on projects at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Los Angeles County Art Museum. At the latter museum, Christoph Zuschlag collaborated on the exhibition of Nazi Germany’s presentation of what they called “Degenerate Art,” which is also the topic of his 1991 dissertation the University of Heidelberg. The book version, »Entartete Kunst«. Ausstellungsstrategien in Nazi-Deutschland [“Degenerate Art”—Strategies for Exhibitions in Nazi Germany], is in preparation with a publisher, the Wernersche Verlagsbuchhandlung.

With this latest addition to the editorial board, I feel DIMENSION has become more effective. This is very important to make sure that contemporary literature, in particular, but also contemporary art from German-speaking countries has a strong voice that can be clearly heard by a primarily English-speaking audience.

September 1994 Kilgore, Texas

... AND THEN THERE WAS SASCHA

STEPHEN BROCKMANN

“There has never been a creation as joyless as this one.”
—Paul de Lagarde, Deutsche Schriften

Since most writers live in and try to write about the real world, any major political event, such as German reunification, is bound to have important consequences on literature. Whether explicitly or implicitly, the study of literature is based on this premise. Since the nineteenth century scholars have divided literature into essentially national-political categories—English literature, French literature, Russian literature, American literature, etc.—based on the assumption that national literatures are related to or even express the essence of particular nations which are in some fundamental way different from each other culturally and spiritually. Scholars simply assume that French literature is pronouncedly different from German literature, and that Russian literature is different from Spanish literature. The distinction seems so obvious that it is rarely made explicit. At universities and colleges the distinction generally finds expression in separate departments or faculties: German, French, Spanish, etc. And within the profession there are separate organizations for German Studies and Italian Studies, for instance. All such organizing principles are ultimately and originally linked to the concept and the fact of the nation itself as it emerged in modern Europe from the end of the Middle Ages through the late nineteenth century and as it sought to define itself via differentness. Each nation has to be fundamentally different from other nations in order to define its own identity. When universities first developed, there was no such thing as a national literature department for the simple reason that there was no such thing as a nation. There were no German departments because there was no Germany. On the contrary: German departments emerged with Germany itself as a nation-state, which only then needed a Germanistik or science.

of differentiation. And when Germany, the nation-state, was divided, so too was the study of German literature: there was GDR Studies, and there was the study of the literature of the Federal Republic. National literary studies always provide not only analyses of but also justifications for political and cultural boundaries. If the European Union ever becomes a political reality, replacing individual nations, then that development, too, will no doubt be reflected in literary studies by the elimination of separate French, German, Italian, and Spanish departments.

Within the national-political boundaries set for it by politicians and statesmen, literary criticism further subdivides its field chronologically, also based primarily on political principles of classification. Throughout its first century, much of Germanistik concerned itself with establishing a national-cultural pre-history of Germany, i.e., with extending the boundaries of the concept Germany backward in time, thus giving it legitimacy in the present. And even when it dealt with relatively recent literature, Germanistik observed political breaks. Within German literature we have, therefore, Junges Deutschland and Vormärz, the literature of the Kaiserzeit, the literature of the Weimar Republic, and the literature of the Third Reich. As constructed in the nineteenth century, the field of Germanistik has been fundamentally related to German national political history. This was true even at times of a supposedly apolitical and purely aesthetic literary criticism, such as during the 1950s and early 1960s, when reaction to the Nazis' complete politicization of literary studies tended toward a total denial of political relevance for literature.

In placing a consideration of literature and German reunification in this broader national-political context, it is my purpose not to reject but to relativize the national-political mode of classification. No mode of classification is "natural," and the fact that a particular mode of classification is socially constructed and "artificial" is more an argument for its strength and importance than for its irrelevance. In spite or even because of its social constructedness, the national-political mode seems to me the best and most obvious mode at this time. And precisely because German literature has always been looked at as closely connected to the German nation, German literature is closely connected to the German nation. German authors are well aware of the interpretive tradition in which they stand. Bismarck was not the only Reichsgründer. Germanistik and Germanists have always played an important role in defining the answer to Wagner's famous question, "What is German?"

Many Germanists have seen themselves as Keepers of the Grail of true Germanness. The history of the triangular relationship among the German nation, German literature, and German literary criticism in the last two centuries ought at least to give literary critics pause and to make more modest their claims to objectivity and "pure" science. Germanistik is rarely objective and never pure, even or especially at a time when, as now, history has supposedly come to an end. The writing and study of literature in Germany is always also a political act, if not in quite so obvious a way as the opening of the Berlin Wall in the fall of 1989 or the signing of the reunification treaties between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic in the summer of 1990.

The events since German reunification have given ample opportunity to confirm the interconnectedness of literature and politics in Central Europe. Writers on both sides of the Wall were intimately caught up in the drama of the GDR's collapse. Christa Wolf and Stefan Heym dreamed of a "Third Path" beyond Soviet/GDR Communism and American/FRG capitalism, urging their fellow countrymen to stay in the GDR and work toward democratic socialism. Günter Grass, perhaps the most important living German writer, argued forcefully against German reunification in a series of blistering speeches and essays, unintentionally echoing nineteenth-century nationalist Paul de Lagarde's criticism of Bismarck's unification in declaring that the newly created Germany of the second unification was "barren of all joy." Monika Maron complained first about writers' arrogance in the face of East Germans' materialistic desire for bananas and then about East Germans' materialistic desire for bananas. Peter Schneider, fascinated by the genetics of twins, became America's favorite expert on Germany and published frequently on the subject both at home and abroad, not forgetting to castigate other writers for their previous failures to place the German question at the center of their activity. Wolf Biermann composed odes to the collapse of Communism, the triumph of capitalism, and the end of the world. Martin Walser was the man who had very publicly suffered the pain of German division all along. Martin Ahrends ironically mourned the loss of the fairy-tale-like protection of the GDR behind its metaphorical hedge of thorns. And then there was Patrick Süßkind, sad to see the homey comfort of West Germany disturbed by the East German hordes. And Heiner Müller, cynically resigned to the end of the world. And then there was the Gulf War. And then Yugoslavia—or rather, the end of Yugoslavia. And then there was Sascha Anderson and Reiner Schedlinski and the Stasi. Oh God, the Stasi...

In short, literary debates since German reunification have been ample, vehement, and confusing, sometimes pitting old friends against each other, sometimes bringing old enemies together. The debates have been so complex, vitriolic, and self-righteous that from an American perspective they sometimes seem exotic or even arcane, reminiscent of
medieval scholastic debates about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. The situation is still very much in flux. As Sascha Anderson, the hip avant-garde poet of East Berlin's 1980s Prenzlauer Berg literary scene, attacked by Wolf Biermann as a Stasi informer in the fall of 1991, put it in his first major volume of poetry:

jedes erste programm hat ein zweites programm
jedes zweite programm hat ein drittes programm
jedes dritte programm hat ein viertes programm
jedes vierte programm hat ein fiinftes programm

[Every first program has a second program
every second program has a third program
every third program has a fourth program
every fourth program has a fifth program]²

The series of programs is by no means over yet, and so one can only draw provisional conclusions now. In view of the relative complexity of the debates, I will not even try to summarize all of them here but will simply state those provisional conclusions in the form of six basic theses:

1. Everyone is confused. In spite of what they may say now, no one, least of all German writers, expected German reunification. It came like a bolt out of the blue. But instead of seeking consolation in the Book of Ecclesiastes and its words on the vanity and inconstancy of all human striving, writers, who are really more or less like the rest of us—they don't like to be caught with their pants down—, are seeking to show how they really sensed what was coming all along. But what happened in Europe in the fall of 1989 was not just political and certainly not confined to the eastern half of what used to be the divided continent; it was the total breakdown of a linguistic and ideological system at once bipolar and regressive which had governed European affairs since the end of World War Two, and possibly even longer. There is little doubt that Germany will be feeling the shock waves from this collapse for some time to come. The first symptom of shock is confusion; the second is self-righteousness and lashing out at others.


2. Since no one, least of all the Germans, who were generally quite comfortable with their own divided national status, expected or even particularly wanted the new era that began in 1989, we do not quite know what era we are living in. We will probably have to wait until the end of the current era before we can name it and classify it, and before we can expect any major expression of it in literature. As the nineteenth-century philosopher Hegel said, the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only at the coming of dusk: it is only at the end of an era that one can begin to understand, to comprehend that era. This is a very old truth, from Homer to Tolstoy and beyond: the great chronicles always come after the fact. What this means for the present is that we can now expect both literature and literary criticism in Germany to address themselves wholeheartedly to the bygone era: the Cold War, the era of German division, the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. Since that era is now over, it is possible to write about it with an insight and an overview never previously possible. If we think back to the history of German epic literature in the twentieth century, we see that the great epic literature of each period tends to sum up the essence of the previous period. Thus masterpieces like Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain and Robert Musil's The Man Without Qualities summed up the bygone era prior to the First World War; while the Nazis tended to attack Weimar, the Federal Republic and the GDR attacked the Nazis.

We can expect a repeat of this phenomenon in the new era, which will define itself on the basis of continuity or discontinuity with the old era. Already we have seen Wolfgang Hilbig's extraordinary novel Ich, published in the fall of 1993, which captures and sums up the hall-of-mirrors paranoia of the late GDR better than any facts and figures about the Stasi ever could.³ And Heiner Müller's masterful, almost epic poem "Mommsen's Block," published in the summer of 1993, is the first post-reunification, post-Communist work to have captured the tone of Ecclesiastes itself, the vanity of striving, and the doomed nature of all human projects, especially great ones. Kurt Darrow's Spiegelwand: Ein deutscher Monolog [Mirrorland: A German Monologue] also sums up much of the essence of life in the late GDR and, like Hilbig's work, begins to approach a more sophisticated understanding of the postwar period as a binary system of paranoia in both East and West.

We are, however, still waiting for a great epic treatment of life in the Federal Republic. The fact that already a number of writers have

³An excerpt from Hilbig novel Ich, translated as I, was published in the January 1994 issue of DIMENSION, pp. 28-43.
criticism of dominant opinions and states of affairs. Informed by “constitutional patriotism,” it demanded the realization of constitutional freedoms and individual rights which established power centers always and repeatedly sought to limit. This literature (or, alternatively, literary intellectuals) did indeed stabilize West German society by changing it, by “democratizing” and “westernizing” it (even if the critical-moralistic essence of this literature made it a peculiarly German phenomenon). But what is there to criticize about this function of “creating identity”?24

What is at issue between Schirrmacher and Vogt is the role of West German literature in helping to forge a West German identity—precisely the “traditional” task of literature and culture in Germany. For Vogt, post-war literature turned the tables on the conservative German nationalist tradition by helping to forge a critical, democratic identity, an identity which Schirrmacher criticizes. But while the two critics disagree in their value judgments, both agree on the central role of literature in creating identity. While this may have been true for Group 47 in the early years of the Federal Republic, I suspect that it is no longer true, and that literature in the Federal Republic is far more marginal as a factor in identity creation. Indeed, this marginality is precisely one of the characteristics which separates literature's function in the West from its function in the East.

For both Schirrmacher and Vogt in their analyses of the Federal Republic and its relationship to literature, “the past” was still being come to terms with, but it was a different past. The first task of the new era would be to come to terms with the old era, i.e., the era of the Federal Republic, not the era before it, i.e., the Third Reich. The new era, in other words, has a “new” past. Walser’s Die Verteidigung der Kindheit, with a hero neurotically incapable of development or change, almost seemed a novelistic treatment of Schirrmacher’s cultural theory. But there is as yet no major epic work that deals with the span and scope of Federal Republic development more positively. Whether such an epic will appear may be doubtful, precisely because of the different function of literature in the Federal Republic.

If the postwar period in West Germany (and also in East Germany, from a different perspective) had been intellectually, culturally, and

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politically determined by a coming to terms with the National Socialist past, with Peter Weiss’s *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* [Aesthetics of Resistance] as perhaps the great, overwhelming masterpiece of Federal Republican literature, then the post-postwar period, or however the period we are now living in may ultimately be called, will be determined intellectually, culturally, and politically by the interpretation of the Cold War period, i.e., the cultures of the Federal Republic and the GDR and the interpretation of German division. The epic, lyric, dramatic, and critical efforts to interpret the history and culture of the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic will have crucial significance in the new Germany. Christa Wolf’s controversial 1990 story *Was bleibt* [What Remains] expresses the crucial question and also implies somewhat conservatively (in line with the central function of literature in the former GDR) that writers will provide the answer. There has as yet been no such audacious statement on the part of a Western writer. As the informer-aspiring writer-Stasi spy who is the central figure and narrator of Wolfgang Hilbig’s novel *Ich* notes, “Notwendig einen Gebrauchswert hatte die Literatur in der westlichen Gesellschaft natürlich nicht.” [Of course, the literature in Western society did not necessarily have any use value.] Whatever kinds of epic or critical treatment we may see of the history of the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic in the future, the new period will be characterized by a struggle between those who wish to see a continuity with the critical anti-fascist past of both the Federal Republic and the GDR and those who wish to reject the divided past entirely and return to older, more “German” models of national identity.

3. The reinterpretation of the years 1945–1989 will bring with it strange alliances and unexpected political enmities. While many still immersed in Cold War left-right divisions have interpreted the post-unification period as a simple zero-sum game between the old GDR and the old FRG—what the old GDR loses the old FRG gains, and so forth—, in fact that conflict is permanently over and could never adequately have been described as a zero-sum game even when it was in full swing. Neither the old GDR nor the old FRG exists any more, even if the modus of reunification not only implies but ensures a certain continuity with the politics, lifestyle, and culture of the old Federal Republic and a radical break with the politics, lifestyle, and culture of the old German Democratic Republic. In the reinterpretation of the 1945–1989 period, it will be the “left” that defends the achievements of the old Federal Republic and the “right” that attacks them. The “right” will tend to argue for understanding 1989 as a radical break, whereas the “left” will tend to argue for continuity. This will upset our received notions of what “left” and “right” are.

4. In particular we will see—and already have seen—the emergence of a “new” German conservatism that hooks up with anti-western, anti-materialist, anticapitalist critiques from the so-called “conservative revolution” prior to 1933. Grown accustomed to half a century of relatively clear ideological boundaries and to the determination of European history by non-European or only partly-European superpowers, the intellectual world in Europe and the United States is completely unprepared for the (re-)emergence of such a “new” conservatism. Such unpreparedness finds expression in the rather flustered reactions of German intellectuals to filmmaker Hans Jürgen Syberberg’s 1990 tract *Vom Unglück und Glück der Kunst in Deutschland nach dem letzten Kriege* [Of Art’s Bad and Good Fortunes in Germany after the last War] and playwright Botho Strauß’s 1993 essay “Anschwellender Bocksgang” [Rising Goat-Song], both of which are primary expressions of the new/old conservatism. In the tradition of what historian Fritz Stern famously called “the politics of cultural despair,” this conservatism will attack Western materialism, cultural inferiority, spiritual emptiness, and frequently unification itself, praising instead a Germanic depth of spirit, capacity for suffering, and closeness to the land. This new conservatism will view the old GDR as somehow more authentically German than the old Federal Republic. Shortly before political unification, young right-winger Marcus Bauer called the GDR “culturally more intact and socially more creative” than the old Federal Republic, echoing Hans Jürgen Syberberg’s statement that:

> Everything will depend on the extent to which the Eastern part of Europe will have the strength to fend off the dangers from the West, to resist multiple dangers at the root, once it has freed itself from its deadly ossifications. Already many Western attacks have pounded in vain against the original essence of Eastern spirit. The Western danger of self-destructive tendencies...
is deceptively strong, but in spite of many self-blockages in the East and lack of freedom in the political system, after the end of that political system this reunification of Eastern and Western Europe may still be one last chance. After the erasure of Prussia, Western temptations and Eastern strengths of original essences of thought and feeling that have not yet been used up now stand in opposition to one another. Perhaps the East will wake up to new reflection on an intelligent symbiosis ... The wealth of Eastern Europe is not what it became through socialist achievements but what it remained, what Marxism left out through refusal and incompetence.7

Syberberg’s theses were an interesting twist on the popular 1990 theme of “What remains,” for they suggested, in absolute contradiction to smug West German certainties, that “what remained” was to be found primarily in the East, not in the West. It was in East Germany that the true Germany had always existed, in hiding, like the medieval Holy Roman Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa of folk legend in his subterranean cavern. Syberberg hoped for a reunification that would proceed as a kind of awakening of that Barbarossa, of the true Germany, in all its cultural greatness, that would eradicate what he saw as the false, alienated, Westernized, Americanized Germany of the Federal Republic.

The new conservatism will contain distinctly “Green” elements combined with romantic anticapitalism. One of the most interesting ideological battles of the coming years will occur between the “old” right and the “new” right—between what Jürgen Habermas called “DM-Nationalism,” which bases German identity on abstract monetary success, and hence retrospectively on the postwar West German “economic miracle,” and a Germanic essentialism for which any freely convertible national currency will have purely subsidiary importance. Likewise there will be a battle between the “old” left, which attacked capitalism and hence also the Federal Republic as an agent of capitalism, and the “new” left, which will defend the democratic achievement in the Federal Republic of an open public sphere and citizen participation and acknowledge a connection between economic and political liberalism.

We can expect to see alliances of convenience between the new right and the old left and the old right and the new left.

5. As in the past, many of the debates in the reunited Germany will center on the question: “Is Germany a normal country?” There will be those who argue for the existence of some fundamental German essence that is irrevocably different from the “essence” of other countries, and there will be those who argue that no such essence exists. (There will be few, however, who argue against the very concept of normality). Here too “left” and “right” will be confused. The old left and the new right will argue that Germany is fundamentally different; for the former this difference will be negative, for the latter positive. Standing in for the old left is a figure like Günter Grass, who argues that

Nothing, no national emotion, no matter how idyllically tinted, not even any protestations of the amiable nature of those born too late, can relativize or easily do away with this experience, which we as the guilty ones 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.8

Standing in for the new right is a figure like young Republikaner intellectual Karl Richter, who, even while completely denying the importance of the Holocaust, nevertheless argues for a fundamental and ineradicable German alterity, suggesting that “the German Sonderweg [special path], a constant annoyance to the proponents of the Atlantic community of values, ought really to be seen as the symbol of quality of Germanness in the world, not as a stigma.” The new left and the old right will argue that Germany is achieving normality and is more or less like other wealthy, democratic Western societies. Thus Helmut Kohl, representative of the old right and Chancellor of unification, will continue

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6Günter Grass, “Schreiben nach Auschwitz,” Die Zeit, 2 March 1990, p. 12; republished in book form by Luchterhand the same year. Grass’s reference to those literally “born afterwards” (”nachgeboren”) is a reference to Chancellor Kohl’s frequently mentioned “grace of late birth” (”Gnade der späten Geburt”), i.e., the concept that those too young to have been implicated in Nazi crimes cannot be held responsible for them.

7Hans Jürgen Syberberg, Vom Unglück und Glück der Kunst in Deutschland nach dem letzten Kriege (Berlin: Siedler, 1990), pp. 90-91.

to argue for the primary goal:

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. 10

We can expect the interest in normality to yield up many more studies
and reflections on the German Sonderweg or “special path.” Those who
favor German normalization will declare the Sonderweg over, while
those who favor German alterity will declare it still valid, either posi-
tively or negatively. In their striving for some kind of “normality,” no
matter how such “normality” might be defined, the old right and the
new left will argue for a merging of Germany with Western Europe and
the United States, and thus ultimately for the diminution of the very
power of the national concept itself. The old left and the new right, on
the contrary, will strive to preserve a sense of German identity.

6. Finally, German literature will play a role in these debates. To the
extent that German tradition has asked writers and German literary
critics to define the essence of the German nation, literature will have an
institutional pull from the right: it is only in the context of a society that
defines itself culturally, not economically, that writers achieve supreme
importance as arbiters of national identity. In the context of a post-
modern, postnational society, writers lose their specific national im-
portance, even as they gain aesthetic freedom. As many have pointed
out, censors are needed only in a society that defines itself largely via
literature; they are living proof of the extreme importance and serious-
ness of writers as preceptors of identity. The two-state system that pre-
vailed in Germany from 1949-1989 had the paradoxical function of pre-
serving the concept of the Kulturnation and of culture as somehow
higher and more authentic than politics. Precisely because of Germany’s
political division, Germany’s essence could be experienced not as political
but as cultural, spiritual, historical. Germany’s divided status lent
literature a profound weight that it will probably no longer possess as
the country becomes more Western, more postmodern, more multi-
cultural, more “normal.” Germany and German literature have been re-
unified at a time when the concept of the nation itself is coming under

10Serge Schmemann, “Kohl, the Mann for the German Moment,” The New
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