Germany's Illiberal Fictions

Jacob Heilbrunn

WHEN THE Nobel committee awarded Günter Grass its literature prize earlier this year, it recognized his stature not only as a novelist but as Germany's leading polemicist. Whether it was hitting the campaign trail for socialist Chancellor Willy Brandt in the late 1960s or condemning German reunification, the gloomy, walrus-moustached Grass has made a career of battling the German conservatives he refers to as "skinheads in neckties." Today, the newly minted Nobel laureate appears on talk shows to celebrate the meltdown of the Christian Democratic Union.

Like Heinrich Böll, the first German postwar novelist to win the Nobel, Grass exemplifies the decisive influence the Left has had in shaping contemporary German political culture. Germany's intelligentsia spent much of the Cold War banging its tin drums against consumer capitalism, American imperialism and an imminent resurgence of fascism. Its poets, novelists and critics viewed themselves as the first line of defense against a return to the Third Reich and insisted that it was their fundamental duty to marry literature with politics. To an extent inconceivable in the United States, the German literary class has functioned as the nation's self-appointed moral and political conscience.

But to the dismay of Grass & Co., with reunification an intellectual advance guard composed of former leftists such as the novelist Martin Walser has emerged to champion German national pride. Among other things, this new literary Right maintains that the Holocaust has been wielded as a "moral cudgel" by foreign powers to shame Germany. Dismissing as guilt-ridden humbug the summons of the influential political philosopher Jürgen Habermas for a "constitutional patriotism", it decries the literary Left and its long-held taboos. For much of the history of the Federal Republic, leftist writers espoused an anti-American nationalism that argued for a German *Sonderweg*, or special path, which in practice meant neutrality in the superpower conflict. Now the literary Right, emboldened by reunification, is arguing for its own version of a special path.

Politics of the Unpolitical

IN FACT, the anti-Western sentiments espoused by the German literati transcend political categories. For much of its history, Germany famously saw itself as a land of *Dichter und Denker*, of poets and thinkers who disdained politics as an insufferable intrusion into the artistic sphere. It was jolted out of this complacency by Napoleon's crushing

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defeat of Prussia in 1806. A cadre of writers and philosophers promptly emerged to defend German traditions against the degenerate Enlightenment values embodied by France and England, prompting Lord Palmerston to refer to Germany as "that damned land of professors."

No one was to epitomize this contempt for the West more faithfully than Thomas Mann. As Germany went down to defeat in World War I, Mann penned a defense of German values in his *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*. He insisted that democratic politics was foreign, not just to German writers, but to the country as a whole. "German humanity", he wrote, "basically resists politicization." Mann elaborated:

> I don't want the trafficking of Parliament and parties that leads to the infection of the whole body of the nation with the virus of politics.... I want impartiality, order, and propriety. If that is philistine, then I want to be a philistine. If it is German, then I want in God's name to be called a German.

Mann's greatest novel, *The Magic Mountain* (1924), expressed these sentiments somewhat more cautiously in the form of debates between the hopelessly naive humanist Settembrini, who believes that rationalism and socialism will lead to the brotherhood of man, and the totalitarian Jesuit priest Naphta, who argues that true freedom can only be achieved through obedience and slavery.

If Mann's *Reflections* placed him squarely on the Right, his later denunciations of the Nazis made it appear as if he had subsequently moved leftward. His transition from foe of the West to fervent democrat was acclaimed as nothing less than a symbol of Germany's own postwar evolution. But as the historian Joachim Fest has argued, there is something more than a little facile about this view: the truth is that Mann, who described himself as "the master of contradictions", continued to harbor deep doubts about Western democracy long after the Second World War. These doubts, Fest maintains, provide the key to understanding Mann. They offer a clue as well to understanding the path that an entire generation of German writers would follow after World War II. For while the postwar generation of German scribes lacked the irony and sophistication of Mann's writings, it had faithfully imbibed his suspicions of the West.

During the postwar era, the Left borrowed extensively from Mann's *Reflections* to attack the Americanization of Germany. Its members argued that, in its zeal to confront the Soviet Union, the United States had installed in Bonn a puppet, Konrad Adenauer, who had relied on Nazi industrialists to finance the Cold War militarization of West Germany. Far from repudiating its Nazi past, West Germany was merely an extension and continuation of the Third Reich. By contrast, East Germany, which had enshrined anti-fascism as its state dogma, represented a conclusive break with that past.

The Group of 47

TWO ex-communist novelists, Hans Werner Richter and Alfred Andersch, helped to establish anti-Americanism and sympathy toward the Soviet Union as a staple of postwar German literature. In 1946, at the height of the American denazification campaign, Richter and Andersch obtained a license to publish a journal called *Der Ruf*, which espoused "socialist humanism." U.S. authorities shut it down a year later. Richter responded by inviting his contributors to a meeting at his home in Bavaria, where he founded the Group of 47, a semi-annual meeting of what would become a veritable who's who of postwar literature.

Photofest

Its members included Heinrich Böll, Günter Grass, Martin Walser and Hans Magnus Enzensberger.

Nothing incensed these writers more than the *Wirtschaftswunder*, or economic miracle, which re-created a prosperous German middle class. Heinrich Böll fired the first blasts. His novels, while skillfully written, tended to rely heavily on caricatures of cynical, cigar-smoking industrialists who had profited during the Nazi era and who now formed the ruling class of the Federal Republic. By the 1970s, in his novel *Precautionary Siege*, Böll was depicting a Federal Republic led by a dictatorship in which every citizen was closely monitored by the government. The message was clear: little distinguished West Germany from its predecessor.

But it was Günter Grass who would become the most outspoken and influential member of the Group of 47. Born in Danzig, Grass personally witnessed the destruction of Germany's eastern provinces during the war and drew on this experience in his novels. His first major work was *The Tin Drum*, to which the Group of 47 awarded its prize for best new novel. It appeared in 1959 and its vigorous, caustic language was a far cry from the restrained prose of Böll. The protagonist, a child named Oskar Mazareth, refuses to grow up and remains a dwarf, the embodiment of Germany's own stunted development. His screams shatter windows, and, incapable of coping with the dreadful reality of postwar capitalism, he winds up in an insane asylum, itself a metaphor for West Germany. What is often overlooked in Grass' novel is the nostalgia for the East that suffuses it. In his depictions of Oskar's mother and the Polish grain fields, Grass lapses into sheer bathos; in evoking his childhood in Danzig, he crafts an elegy for German links to the East. This idealization of the East, the notion that it represented something purer than the West, is a leitmotif traceable to Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.

In the 1960s, with the construction of the Berlin Wall, Grass and other intellectuals repeatedly enthused about life on the other side. While they busily denounced the "postfascism" of West Germany, they virtually ignored the totalitarian character of the state next door. Instead, like Mann pining for the romantic world of "music, posthorns, homesickness", they indulged in fantasies that depicted East Germany as a niche society

where the state treated writers properly and showered them with attention and special privileges—while the idealistic population, when not working to build socialism, eagerly consumed their latest novels. West Germany, by contrast, was a backslider, an immoral country filled with worshipers of the deutschemark (DM) who had buried their past in friendship with the United States.

By the 1980s, the anathemas pronounced by the German intelligentsia knew few bounds. Bernt Engelmann, the official spokesman of the Writers Association of the Federal Republic, declared, "We should finally separate ourselves from anything that has to do with the wish to restore a German nation-state." The novelist Friedrich Dürrenmatt announced that, henceforth, "Germany" would be a term "that will only exist in memory, in nostalgia, in sentimentality, and finally in the past." Together with Böll, Grass denounced the United States for preparing a new Holocaust in the middle of Europe.

The Kohl government's decision to support the stationing of Pershing cruise missiles on German soil especially enraged Grass. In an address in St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt on January 30, 1983—the fiftieth anniversary of Hitler's rise to power—he declaimed that "the present West German government is too mindless and powerless to defend Germany's special interests against the allied superpower and our neighbor France. In place of a firm policy it offers cowardly toadying." In 1986 Grass led a group of writers, artists and scientists to a supposed missile site, where he urged "resistance" to "democratically legalized lawlessness" and insisted that the United States was girding itself for an offensive war. "For me", Grass said, "the American president is no security guarantee, rather the opposite." Another Auschwitz, he declared, could be in the making.

The Past That Will Not Pass

WITH reunification Grass and his colleagues were caught flatfooted. He and his companions were revealed to have been living in a dream world, blind to the realities of both West and East Germany. The best response that Grass could muster was a fulmination about East Germans traveling to Berlin to eat fresh fruit, while Jürgen Habermas railed about a DM-nationalism taking over Eastern Europe. Meanwhile less extreme members of the literary Left had begun defecting to the Right, some, indeed, now conceding that communist totalitarianism was as pernicious as Nazism, and in many ways similar to it.

These themes, of course, had been percolating on the Right for some time, at least since the *Historikerstreit*, or historians' dispute, that rocked Germany in 1986. The debate raised, in the most fundamental and painful way, the question of German identity—whether, after Auschwitz, Germany could, or even should, aspire to be a "normal" nation. But for leftists such as Habermas, the mere consideration of these questions amounted to a dangerous plot to resurrect the old Adam of German nationalism.

The dispute began when historian Ernst Nolte published an essay in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* called "The Past That Will Not Pass Away." In it, Nolte argued that the Holocaust was not unique: Lenin's Red Terror, in fact, had been a dress rehearsal for the murder of the Jews, and Hitler, in any case, was merely responding to his fear of a Stalinist "Asiatic terror." Nolte was promptly denounced by Habermas and a host of historians, but his was merely the first shot fired in a battle that continues to this day, the most recent fusillade being the publication of *The Black Book of Communism.*

Those making claims similar to Nolte's include historian Arnulf Baring of the Free University of Berlin, the influential playwright Botho Strauss and Willy Brandt's widow, Brigitta Seebacher-Brandt. These figures routinely inveigh against Germany's 1968 generation for enforcing a politically correct version of German history. Their target is usually the Bonn republic, whose national religion is said to have been self-effacement. Seebacher-Brandt declared, "The time has disappeared, the time from which sorrow, shame, and timorousness arose. It does not exist and never has existed—the 'Bonn republic.'" Frank Castorf, a leading German theater director, has called for a return to "fascist ideas." But it was Botho Strauss who captured the most attention with his 1993 essay in *Der Spiegel*, "The Swelling Song of the Billy Goat." Strauss assailed the consumerism and the "sinister aeries of the Enlightenment." He complained that the only ones with the courage to defend German values were the neo-Nazis attacking foreigners, writing, "That a people wishes to assert its legal customs against another and is prepared to sacrifice blood we no longer understand, and, in our liberal-libertarian self-delusion, view as false and damnable."

Perhaps the most important novelist on the Right today is Martin Walser. Walser, indeed, is the mirror-image of Grass. In the early 1960s, he hewed to the conventional wisdom about Germany espoused by its literary set. He argued that the division of the country had been a good thing: "Now we are probably protected forever against those idiotic dynasties or half-crazed fanatics of the 'Reich' who want to weld us together as a nation." By 1977, however, Walser was sounding a different theme. In an address at Bergen-Belsen, he said, "We cannot, and I say this trembling with audacity, recognize the Federal Republic anymore than we can East Germany. We must hold the wound named Germany open." And in a 1988 essay entitled "Handshake with Ghosts", Walser mused, "If we could master Auschwitz, we could again turn toward national tasks." Exactly what those tasks might be Walser did not say.

With reunification, Walser's views sharpened still further. In his lengthy autobiographical novel, *A Flowing Well*, which appeared in 1998, he tackled the question of personal memory and the Nazi era by devising an alter ego named Johann. In Johann's telling of that period there is only a fleeting reference to a Jewish character and the word Auschwitz never appears. The Americanization of Germany is portrayed as unnecessary and a mistake. By contrast, Walser depicts the Nazi era as a normal time for most Germans, or about as normal as life during wartime can be. He suggests that economic misery made it logical for Germans to join the Nazi party; Johann's mother becomes a party member merely to draw business away from a rival pub and rescue her establishment from likely financial ruin.

In recounting such episodes, Walser seeks not only to depict the Nazi era as largely benign, but also to distance himself and Germany from its barbarism. But what Walser also does is conflate the suffering of German Jews with the calamities that ordinary Germans experienced during the war—finding enough food to eat, losing a son, being bombed. In a lengthy interview with Rudolf Augstein in *Der Spiegel*, Walser expressed his incredulity at, and ridicule for, Augstein's childhood memories of his family's repugnance for the Nazis, maintaining that one could not have known at the time, particularly as a child, that Nazism was evil. In the same interview, Walser fondly recalled his own wartime youth and maintained that the Jews he knew were not stigmatized, let alone murdered:

> I can truly say that in the village in which I grew up I first learned, after 1945, who was a Jew or Jewess. We had our coal trade and one of our customers was Frau Hensel, a pianist from Munich. Neither my mother nor father told me that she was Jewish. I believe they didn't know it. And Frau Hensel was there after 1945 just as she had been before.

Walser's novel was merely a prelude for worse to come. In 1998, before an audience in St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt that included German President Roman Herzog and Ignatz Bubis, the head of the German Jewish community, Walser delivered a speech entitled "Experiences While Drafting a Sunday Talk." At the end of the talk, Bubis was the only member of the audience to refrain from clapping, and he went on to call Walser "a spiritual arsonist." By the end of the month hundreds of articles had been written about the "Walser affair." To the surprise of much of the intelligentsia, Walser had managed to strike a responsive chord in the German population, tapping into latent (and not so latent) resentment over Jewish demands for German reparations.

In his speech Walser announced that he had "learned to look away" from terrible events. "I have many corners that I flee into", he continued. "I think my stance is reasonable. One does not have to endure the unendurable. I'm also practiced in forgetting about things." Walser maintained that he would not make it through a single day had he not become a practiced expert at suppressing unpleasant memories. There is not a moment, Walser declared, when Germany's historical burden is not waved in front of it, that a "moral club" is not wielded against it, that the past is not "instrumentalized" by foreign powers intent on exacting reparations from Germans. Responding to Walser in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, Bubis noted, "I have always said that when [neo-Nazi leaders] say something like this, then no person is interested. It has no effect. But when Martin Walser says it, then it has a totally different effect."

Bubis was correct. Soon enough, others began to question the taboos of the past. The philosopher Peter Sloterdijk diverted some of the attention from Walser when he delivered an address called "Rules for the Human Zoo: An Answer to the Letter on Humanism"—a lecture sponsored in part by Jerusalem's Hebrew University. His speech amounted to a declaration of war against Jürgen Habermas and the notion that constitutional patriotism could supplant the German anthem and flag. Sloterdijk announced to a horrified audience that it was time to return to the tough-minded thinking of Nietzsche and Heidegger, whose famous 1946 essay on humanism he was responding to. In an era of mass culture and barbarism—of, in short, "Americanism"—said Sloterdijk, the ideals of humanism were dead, and good riddance. He then mused whether it might be possible to combine education and genetic engineering to create a new master race.

The "master of dangerous thinking", as Sloterdijk described Nietzsche, showed in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* how man would become domesticated, through the melding of ethics and genetics, into a kind of pygmy—the last man. Sloterdijk approvingly observed that Nietzsche recognized that future conflict would be between the breeders of pygmies and the would-be breeders of a master race. For months, the pages of German newspapers were filled with tirades between Sloterdijk and his opponents; "Gene-Project Superman: Hitler, Nietzsche, Dolly and the new philosophers' battle", announced the cover of *Der Spiegel*. Sloterdijk's list of crimes was alleged to include everything from advocating fascist thought to the destruction of the German social welfare state. But Sloterdijk's ruminations were

simply the latest in a series of challenges to the taboos established and maintained by the liberal-left mainstream during the Bonn republic.

A FEW YEARS ago, Josef Joffe, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, dismissed the notion that any serious changes had taken place in Germany since reunification: "Germany is boring." But as these debates indicate, nothing could be further from the truth. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder—who seeks to modernize not only the Social Democratic Party but Germany itself—and other politicians have begun to question sacred dogmas. During the Walser debate, Schröder declared that there are some things that a chancellor might like to say, but only a novelist can.

The idea of the writer as *praeceptor Germaniae*, as the all-knowing seer to whom the populace should defer, is a theme in German history that continues to bedevil the country. Thus, it is intellectuals who have picked up the cudgels for a return to national pride. And like the Left, the literary Right has become entangled in, and has shamelessly misused, the Nazi past. Indeed, the problem with Germany's novelists is not that they pay too little attention to their history, but too much. □

Identity Problem

Writing about the 1930s, Stürmer still finds it baffling that a vulgar mass movement, led by a ruthless preacher, could attract a middle-class that was educated in the humanities. Again, he seeks to explain this by pointing out the loss of tradition. In his words, 'disorientation, demoralization and fear of the abyss had undermined all tradition.' This fits in well with Stürmer's promotion of a healthy historical identity for Germany today. But the seduction of millions of Goethe-readers and Beethoven-worshipers is surely not all that mysterious. Intellectuals are easily seduced by collective, quasi-spiritual, idealistic movements that promise to redefine the identity of the nation. Defining the national identity is, after all, their natural occupation. Yet in the absence of active, political citizenship, intellectuals soon fall prey to feelings of uselessness and alienation. And there is no better cure for intellectual self-pity than to be received into the warm bosom of the *Volk*.

—Ian Buruma, *The New Republic*, January 31, 2000