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Cory H. Rosenberg
Gettysburg College

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Strange Bedfellows and Their Grandchildren: German Literature as Evidence and Confession of Reunification

Abstract

From Hegel to Merkel, from Bismarck to BMW, German culture has defined and re-defined itself through a cycle of reaction; thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Modern Germany has certainly not escaped this pattern, existing in a very deep and surprisingly present way in reaction to the collapse of the East German state and the formation of a unified Germany. This paper examines the ways in which contemporary German authors evidence this reaction in their work. As a nation at the heart of the East/West divide throughout the Cold War, Germany provides an ideal lens through which to view the shifting cultural, economic, artistic and societal trends of the last three decades. Feelings of powerlessness, loss and nostalgia are evidenced within these trends. Even a small sampling of contemporary German sources sheds light on the ways in which national and personal trauma are internalized and digested—both in the individual and in society as a whole. Using the novels *Simple Stories* (Schultze, 2002), *Berlin Blues* (Regener, 2001), and the short stories *Ubuville* (1998) and *German Lesson* (Wondratschek, 1998) among others, this paper examines the ways in which contemporary German authors manifest this reaction in their work. This paper demonstrates that although the works vary in form and tone, they all display the feelings of disaffection and the omnipresence of the reunification as the great “elephant in the room” of modern Germany. The forceful merging of two nations, two political systems and two peoples, left behind a great and living trauma, one which is made manifest daily in the thoughts and actions of Germans (especially in the East) and in their creative output. As attention in the global West was focused unilaterally on the West Germans and the financial burden they bore as a result of reunification, the real plight of reunification and the true force of the trauma (that is, the trauma endured by East Germans) was largely ignored. This paper is thus useful in not only sounding the depths of modern German literature, but also in defining the effects of reunification on those that faced regionalist discrimination and financial pillaging at the hands of the global West. This paper demonstrates how, in the ever shifting maelstrom of an increasingly globalized world, post-unification Germans and particularly former East Germans are an ideal subject of study to increase our understanding of inter- and pan-generational trauma and the resultant processes of personal identification in which we all, to some degree, take part.

Keywords

German, Reunification, Literature, Healing

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | European Languages and Societies | German Literature

Cory Rosenberg
Laurel Cohen-Pfister
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Strange Bedfellows and Their Grandchildren:

German Literature as Reaction to and Evidence of the Traumas of Reunification

In approaching this publication the author employed (with some hubris) the notion of trauma as it is evidenced in German and East German literature before and after the reunification of 1989-90. It is with not inconsiderable relish, that the term trauma has been employed, perhaps one of the most loaded in academia. It should be noted that while the author believes Reunification to have been a source of great pain to many, it is by no means here suggested that a great national trauma (à la the Market Crash of '29) exists in the hearts and minds of the average German. Rather, such a large and loaded term is used in an effort to bring to light a quiet and often ignored counter-narrative. In the Western academy, an uncritical view of the Reunification of Germany is often presented, when it is given consideration at all, which serves only to muddle an already tumultuous time in world history. The author is under no pretense of settling the dust, nor of offering the final word on the matter. There is no elixir of clarity and alas, it is clear that we are far from finding the last piece of the puzzle that is modern Germany. What is presented here, rather, is an attempt to track a small, group of authors and observers for whom the opening of the East was not a grand liberation, but the exchange of one tyranny for another. For many, the story of the road to reunification ends with the famed broadcast of smiling Easterners flooding through the newly opened Berlin wall. And yet, we are presented with a constant stream of creative output hearkening back to the East German state. The temporal span of works presented here also suggests that this is not simply *Ostalgie* (a lovely portmanteau the Germans have given us to describe nostalgia for the east German way of life). What is presented as trauma, is in fact the quiet *Verfremdung* (alienation) into which many in the East were thrown. It is this *Verfremdung* that resounds

thunderously below the silent surface of the popular narrative.

The encapsulation of any culture or group of people into a series of generalizations, especially one of this brevity, is of course bound to contain inaccuracies and be wrought with exceptions. To generalize an entire people from a small sampling of their literature is perhaps a feat of madness. And yet, here I shall endeavor to undertake this very feat. While the lessons learned and facts gleaned from a brief viewing are by no means inscrutable, the resulting snapshot can still provide us with valuable insight into the target culture. The term snapshot is used in a non-arbitrary fashion, just as a snapshot captures flatly one moment in time and can offer neither comment nor accurate prediction about the events outside of its temporal or visual purview, so too does one's impression of literature offer a glimpse, a moment, a specter, which however fleeting, can still be revealing. With this limited, albeit focused scope, this paper will attempt to make specific inferences regarding modern German culture, culled from period sources and sources which cast a retrospective eye on the reunification. Sources such as Regener's Berlin Blues (2004) , Ingo Schultze's Simple Stories (2002), among others will be used. The underlying cultural phenomenon consistently present in these works is that of modern Germany's existence as a reaction to the collapse of the East-German state and the reunification of Germany in the early 1990's. This existence is largely present in a form of disjointedness or disaffectedness in many of the characters. A sense of misanthropy, paranoia, and angst is present in force through all of these works. This resultant identity crisis is prevalent in many aspects of modern German culture and has manifestations manifold throughout these selections.

We will begin with an examination of German culture as seen Sven Regener's "Berlin Blues". This piece offers valuable commentary on Western attitudes toward divided German and East Berlin in general as it takes place in West Berlin. This piece sets the tone of misanthropy and disengagement of self from society which follows in the other pieces. Herr Lehmann, the central character, is a curmudgeon and a man completely at disconnect with his place in the world. This work is interesting

among those considered here in that it gives the perspective of those living in the West. Herr Lehmann is a resident of Kreuzberg, one of West Berlin's seedier districts and one surrounded on three sides by the Berlin Wall. Lehmann lives in a self-imposed entrapment in his own small corner of the world. While seemingly content and free-spirited in the exposition, one realizes quickly that Lehmann's inability to communicate emotionally with others reflects very much his physically walled off existence. He (like most of the other characters in the novel) is an alcoholic. As the omnipresent supernumerary in the novel, Regener employs the delirium of alcoholism to underscore the emotional and physical disconnect of Lehmann from his surroundings. Understandably the alcoholism manifests occasionally in violence and further discord.

After multiple bar fights, a failed relationship and a visit from his parents that is part comedy of errors, part Kafka horror tale, Lehmann finds himself in a bar when the Berlin Wall opens. Lehmann and those around him are less than enamored with the march of history unfolding before them. After a silence, one of his fellow imbibers proffers an unenthusiastic "We ought to take a look". To which Lehmann replies, "Let's drink up first though". In this short exchange, Lehmann reduces the whole of his character and seemingly the whole of his circle of Kreuzbergers to digestible brevity. The attitude prioritizes alcohol before going to see history being made. Furthermore, these people are so far removed from their surroundings that they go to look only because there seems to be nothing better going on in the bar or on television. The prioritization of alcohol over the Berlin Wall opening is merely a final piece of flippant disaffection coming to the surface. Lehmann as a physical entity is also a fine representative of West Germany as a whole in the early '90's. Even though he is still rather young, every character in the book addresses him as "Herr Lehmann". The salutation "Herr", suggesting polite deference to an older individual, serves to underscore the disjoint between Lehmann's actual age and his attitude toward life. In just such a manner, modern Unified Germany seems always to have stood as an entity simultaneously very young and positively ancient. The

prevailing spirits of middle-aged apathy intermingled with adolescent existential angst highlights the time of reunification as a turning point in history in a place which is as devoid of age as Lehman himself.

Ingo Schulze's "Simple Stories" are anything but. In bringing the reader into a universe of former East Germans adjusting to life immediately after Unification, Schulze allows us to explore the emotional impact of these historic events among Easterners. This piece eludes classification in that, it is neither novel nor short story-collection; while each chapter follows a short narrative arc, the larger integrated whole becomes increasingly confusing as the reader progresses. Starting out simply enough with the strange tale of some East-German travelers in Italy, the reader is led through a labyrinthine mess of characters and circumstances that provide a dramatized sketch of reunification. These characters exist in reaction to the fall of the wall and the early stages of reunification in a very deep and personal manner as a result of being in the geographic center of the historical events in question. The Meurers (for instance) are on a journey through Italy and (in a bid for frugality) have packed all of their own food to bring with them. The trip reveals both their thrift (they purchase only a cheap souvenir plate on the way) and the emotional disconnect of this couple that has been married 20 years. These few details alone reveal the sharp rift between East Germans and the outside world. On a once-in-a-lifetime journey through the gastronomic capital of Southern Europe, the Meurers are happy to eat canned gherkins. In the cradle of the renaissance, they purchase kitsch. In the land of Casanova and fair Verona, they manage just barely to have a moment of sterile physical contact.

The physical manifestation and origin of many of the feelings of insecurity among the East Germans is of course the Stasi, the secret police of the East German state. We see the seeds of the destructive legacy of the Stasi early on in the piece. Characters are driven to desperate acts upon hearing their Stasi codenames uttered on the street. The extent to which some characters had collaborated with the Stasi is slowly revealed. The East Germans lived in a state of fear and self-

consciousness because of the omnipresence of the Stasi. This omnipresence is symbolized in *Simple Stories* by the figure of a “crocodile eye”. This “eye” is in fact a knot in the faux-veneer tops of state office furniture, particularly the old Stasi desks. These desks were sold off when the Stasi was disbanded and they crop up everywhere in the story, reminding the characters and the reading audience that the presence of the Stasi is always felt and always just beneath the surface (regardless of the fact that it no longer exists as an official entity). Lutz Rathenow's short story “Struggle,” written before the fall of the Wall, expresses this pervasive fear. What appears at first to be the uncomplicated tale of a battle between a man in his bathroom and a moth, reveals itself to be poignant commentary on life in a surveillance state. What starts as simple irritation at the presence of a single moth in the protagonist's home turns into an obsessive struggle. The moth, as is made increasingly apparent in the work, is a symbol for Stasi surveillance. While seemingly an innocuous pest, it has entered a private dwelling; it has burrowed into the inmost reaches of the most private spaces of this man's home. Finally, in his attempt to kill it, the moth winds up lodged in his mouth, robbing him of his ability to speak or respire. In precisely such a manor did the conscious knowledge of the presence of the Stasi rob many Easterners of the comforts of private life and the ability to speak freely. We see reinforced in this story the real and present way in which the memory of the Stasi haunts the East German imagination these many years later.

Schulze's *Simple Stories* implements widespread imagery of sexual perversion and near pathological promiscuity throughout the work. From a man who writes pornographic novels and calls newspaper reporters into his home to share invented tales of gang-rape and robbery, to a West-German businessman who rapes a local waitress Schulze has served up an unhealthy and unsavory bunch indeed. This instance of rape is highly symbolic of the state of the two Germanies following the fall of the wall. The West came to the East with promises of prosperity, used what resources it could and promptly left. Meanwhile the East had no one to turn to save its abuser following this rape. This kind of

desperation coupled with the feeling of second-class citizenship imposed on the Easterners led directly to later stereotypes of the Easterners being sub-human, untrustworthy, uneducated and incapable of managing themselves. A Hannes Koch piece written five years after the Reunification, highlighted the wildly disproportionate instance of nervous disorders among former East-Germans as a result of the shock of this transition.¹ Schulze presents characters so desperate for money in former East Germany that they ask neighbors for assistance in maiming themselves for the sake of disability insurance. In commenting on the piece, Paul Cooke notes:

At the heart of the narrative-though never directly discussed- lies the act of German Unification. This appears to the inhabitants of Schulze's society as the beginnings of a devastating process of 'colonisation'...We see Martin Meurer...reduced to working in the West German city of Stuttgart as a live advertisement for a fish restaurant. When he calls a piece of paper that he has to hand out to potential customers a 'Zettel' (leaflet), his boss insists that he use the word "Flyer". The indigenous German word is replaced by the Americanized language of marketing.²

As promised, I have no absolutes to offer. What one finds in Unified Germany, as evidenced in the pieces discussed here, is the pell-mell assemblage of two divergent ways of life. While the West has won the war of the narrative, the East struggles in the search for cultural relevance and representation in some form of the land that millions called home before the Wall fell. While news items regarding uncovered secrets of the former East German regime and scandals about the large pensions drawn by former Stasi operatives do occasionally make press, it seems that many are engaged in the act of forgetting what once was. Especially as the youth of modern Germany are raised in a world where the Wall never existed in their lifetimes, the East/West divide is not one of concrete but one of tacit

1 Hannes Koch in *The World Press Review* Jan. 1995 pg 42.

2 *Contemporary German Fiction*, 2007 Taberner ed. Pg 62

attitudes and prejudices. This is a legacy that can surely not be understood perfectly by a foreigner as it is one which has not reached a point of closure among Germans themselves. It is my hope that works of literature such as those discussed here will serve to problematize, and rekindle the discourse among native Germans and foreigners alike to seek both emotional closure for those who lived through this time and social understanding without the negation of the East-German narrative for the generations yet to come.

Thoreau was writing about his New England neighbors when he said that “Most men lead lives of quiet desperation”. To read these words today, one could swear he was writing about the East Germans. The above examples, but a few from the vast font of German literature, have given us a glimpse into German culture through their views of themselves. Just as “Simple Stories” shows, there are no “good guys” or “bad guys” in this story, merely people reacting to the circumstances around them; the Germans seem as dualistic as can be. And yet there exist larger social movements and characteristics as a result of the historic shocks to which the German people were subjected. Perhaps the snapshot is limited in its scope, but for this brief instance, its colors are vivid.

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