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Introduction: locating the nation

When, in August 1995, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* featured a cover story – and attack – by the critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki on Günter Grass's recently published novel *Ein weites Feld* [*Too Far Afield*], it was confirming once again the central importance of literature in the German national imagination. Although the argument is not universally accepted, I am by no means the first observer to point out the tremendous importance of literature in Germany during the current conjuncture. In his study *The Future of German Literature*, Keith Bullivant devotes considerable acuity to demonstrating that literature, particularly in the West German Federal Republic, has played and, in the reunified Germany of the 1990s, continues to play, a political role that would be unthinkable, for instance, in Britain. Notwithstanding the strategic protestations of German writers to the contrary, Bullivant argues, "it is the British, rather than the Germans, who have lacked an ongoing intellectual discourse, within which imaginative writers played their part."[1] Indeed, Bullivant, along with many others, ascribes to a West German writer like Heinrich Böll the role of "conscience of the nation," and he argues that other West German writers have at times played a similar role.[2] Even the sometimes "vicious attacks on writers by conservative politicians and newspapers" in Germany are, Bullivant suggests, "perhaps the clearest indication of the seriousness with which these writers' views were considered."[3] Much of Bullivant's work is devoted to a critique of those intellectuals inside Germany who have sought to attack the role of German writers in the nation's political life in the post-reunification context.

Although Bullivant does not extend his argument about the pre-1989 "vicious attacks" of German politicians to the similar post-reunification diatribes of some intellectuals, the same point could be made here as well: the very vehemence of intellectual attacks on the

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political role of writers in Germany is an indication of the continuing importance of German writers in the nation's political life. To take the example of Günter Grass and Marcel Reich-Ranicki, it is hardly credible that *Der Spiegel* would have placed this story on its cover had the editors not been convinced that Reich-Ranicki's attack was important news with real consequences for the nation. Whether the editors were for or against Grass's book did not seem to matter: what mattered was that they believed the book to be important. As obvious as this observation may seem, it needs to be reemphasized in an academic context characterized by discussions of "the declining cultural status of literature."[4]

In his study *Die literarische Republik: Westdeutsche Schriftsteller und die Politik* [The Literary Republic: West German Authors and Politics] (1982), Helmut L. Müller made a similar point about the tremendous importance of literary discourse in West Germany, arguing that in many instances West German writers help to create the terms of political discourse within which politicians must justify themselves: "precisely the 1970s clearly showed how great the influence of literary intellectuals is," the largely strategic contrary protestations of writers notwithstanding.[5] As Müller notes, writers "can play a substantial role in determining the political discussion, even if or precisely because they are not in alliance with the powerful." He argues that "the mutual action and reaction of *Geist* and *Macht*, of literature and politics, has helped form the picture of the Federal Republic."[6]

Within the context of East German literature, David Bathrick has made a convincing case for the political role of writers in the German Democratic Republic. His recent monograph *The Powers of Speech* revolves around the concept that in a Communist country that lacked an open public sphere, writers and their works took on a specific political function by enabling discussion and reflection, sometimes in allegorical form, on political and social problems that would otherwise have been ignored. Where other avenues of discourse were blocked because of the Communist regime's repression of open political dialog, literature assumed a privileged role in enabling a more oblique form of communication. As Bathrick suggests, the "very centrality" of literature for East German politicians "helped facilitate the development historically of critical discourses and the articulation of alternative political views within the larger polity."[7] Moreover, the ambiguity of literature gave it a

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privileged place in a socialist public sphere, since "it was literary discourse as discourse that opened up possibilities for a more mutually conceived dialogue between author and reader, literature and the public."[8] Wolfgang Emmerich has argued that the political importance of literature in the GDR gave it "a largely premodern" status that differentiated it from its western counterpart.[9] Like Bathrick and Emmerich, Bullivant also stresses "the unquestioned moral authority which critical literary intellectuals acquired throughout the 1980s in the GDR, when they essentially constituted the only alternative discourse to that of the party and its media,"[10] and he makes the revealing point that in many ways, and in spite of massive political and economic differences between East and West Germany, writers in the two countries enjoyed a substantially similar prestige and authority – a point implicitly contested by Bathrick, who argues that "as an institution, the writer in the GDR bore little resemblance to his or her counterpart in a capitalist society."[11] It is of course true that the institutionalization of literature in the Communist GDR proceeded very differently from the processes in the Federal Republic. But in the seriousness with which they treated their writers, the capitalist and the Communist German state did to some extent parallel each other. Bathrick himself has suggested that "regardless of the very different experiences and institutional structures out of which they came, western writers . . . and GDR dissident writers . . . came to inhabit similar positions as moral leaders of invisible constituencies."[12] As Helmut Peitsch has pointed out, such parallels were partially concealed by the cold war enmity between the FRG and the GDR, which led intellectuals in the two German states to imagine their counterparts as radically different and usually prevented the recognition of overarching similarities.[13]

Confirming Peitsch's point, neither Volker Wehdeking in his study *Die deutsche Einheit und die Schriftsteller* [German Unity and Writers][14] nor Emmerich in the revised version of his authoritative *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR* [Concise Literary History of the GDR] inquires into the similarity of the political role of literature in the two Germanys prior to reunification or in the single Germany of the 1990s.[15] As Emmerich writes self-critically in a 1993 article, "the context of national literature" was virtually ignored by scholars of the 1970s and 1980s, who were all too intent on "divisions and differences" between the two German literatures and failed "to point out connections and even commonalities."[16] Emmerich calls

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this overarching national context "one that may seem obvious but which in fact was not obvious at all, not even in the West."[17] Wehdeking virtually ignores the many literary debates of the early 1990s, concentrating instead almost exclusively on the analysis of individual literary texts. Emmerich devotes himself to a demonstration of the convergent tendencies between West and East German literature during the decade and a half prior to reunification, while eliding the issue of a similar or convergent function of the two literatures at the political level.[18] While he is well aware of the political function of East German literature within GDR society, he is not concerned with comparing that function to the function of literature in West Germany. Indeed, both Emmerich and Wehdeking seem to take for granted that literature and literary intellectuals enjoy profound political importance; they are less interested in asking why that should be the case. It seems possible that the resonance of literary discourse in Germany may be a deep-seated phenomenon easily taken for granted, indeed reified, by those who have become used to it – something, to repeat Emmerich's words, that "may seem obvious but which in fact was not obvious at all."

Peitsch's book *Vom Faschismus zum Kalten Krieg* [From Fascism to the Cold War] is an example of a recent work that places the political role of German literature at the center of attention, and which directly addresses both the Federal Republic and the GDR. However Peitsch's analysis of convergences is highly ambivalent. While he acknowledges parallels, he is, like most other scholars, reluctant to explore those convergences from an overarching national or historical perspective. Moreover, even Peitsch does not seek to make comparisons between the situation in the two Germanys and the situation in other countries. In spite of his emphasis on "Literaturverhältnisse" (literary relations), Peitsch seems more interested in unpacking the political messages encoded in and around discussions of German literature than in analyzing the relationship between literature and politics itself. If confronted with the *Spiegel* cover attacking Grass, such an approach might analyze and criticize Reich-Ranicki's conservative message rather than inquire into the implication of both writer and critic in one and the same discursive context affirming the national importance of literature. There would, of course, be nothing wrong with such an analysis, and indeed Oskar Negt has already gone some way toward providing it.[19] But in addition to analyzing the content of messages,

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it is important to understand the context of which those messages are a part. Reich-Ranicki's criticisms would have had a substantially different impact if they had been uttered by an unknown scholar on the back pages of a regional daily. Appearing in the context it did, however, the attack on Grass was nevertheless also, paradoxically, a reconfirmation of Grass's preeminent cultural-political status as a writer in Germany. In discussing the many debates about German literature in the post-reunification context, few scholars have noted this paradox.

There is a related paradox in the position of a left-liberal academic critic like Peitsch. While Peitsch is concerned with what he sees as the right-wing, authoritarian connotations of most concepts of German national identity, he is nevertheless intent on preserving the prestige of critical literary intellectuals like Günter Grass, a prestige which is, however, itself dependent on the concept of national identity. If Grass were not perceived as in some way a representative of German national culture, he would not appear on the cover of "the German news magazine," and no one would be interested in attacks against or interventions for him. Grass's power and prestige are connected precisely to his role as "conscience of the nation." Where there is no sense of national identity, however, there can be no "conscience of the nation." The powerful political role of postwar German literature is a direct result of its significance not for some unspecified collective but for German national identity. That Peitsch does not seem to be aware of this paradox is indicative of a fundamental problem in left-liberal German criticisms of national identity. German leftists tend to be uncomfortable with, indeed mistrustful of, concepts of the nation, but they would nevertheless like to preserve for literature a progressive political role. How that role could possibly be articulated in an intellectual space outside or above the nation is almost never made clear. Peitsch seems to recognize the dilemma when he notes that apolitical definitions of the writer's role in German society have tended to imply "the renunciation of the representatives of the nation"; however, because Peitsch is himself reluctant to invoke concepts of national identity, the dilemma is not articulated further.[20]

The relative absence or negative judgment in recent literary criticism of the concept of the *Kulturnation* (cultural nation) is a striking indication of the difficulty critics seem to have in addressing this issue. Peitsch, Wehdeking, and Emmerich all fail to mention

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Friedrich Meinecke, the distinguished historian who initially formulated the concept of the *Kulturnation* in the early twentieth century; and in their attempts to define the relationship between literature and politics even K. Stuart Parkes, in his book *Writers and Politics in West Germany*, and Keith Bullivant are silent about Meinecke's invocation of a German cultural unity that preceded and prefigured German political unity. The relative absence of the *Kulturnation* in recent scholarship is all the more striking because the fact of postwar German division and ultimate reunification would seem to be a prime example of the long duration of such forms and concepts. Meinecke had meant to describe Germany's cultural and literary coming-to-consciousness of itself over the course of the nineteenth century – the path from cultural to political unity – but his ideas would seem applicable at least in part to the story of reunification over a century later, in which first writers and later politicians came to recognize the socially constructed reality of the German nation. Since the first publication of Meinecke's *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat* [*Cosmopolitanism and the National State*], the concept of the *Kulturnation* has had a substantial impact on the way Germans have thought about the relationship between politics and culture throughout the twentieth century.[21] If the concept and its history are now conspicuously absent from scholarly discussions of German culture and reunification, then it would seem that the concept itself may be a sore spot, perhaps even a taboo: a disquieting object around which German culture may revolve, but which frequently remains unspoken or even unobserved.

The concept of the *Kulturnation* implies that because of its political division Germany was, for centuries after the political solidification of its chief European rivals France and England, a fragmented, indeed non-existent political entity in the middle of Europe, and that because of this fragmentation Germans could experience national identity and unity only in and through culture. What brought Bavarians, Prussians, Swabians, and Saxons together in the first half of the nineteenth century was not a common political home but rather the sense of a German culture that existed prior to and independent of any political nation-building. "In France, it was the middle class and the men of letters together that created the new national idea," writes Meinecke, but "in Germany it was almost exclusively the men of letters," and hence "the national spirit emerged as a by-product of the intellectual efforts of the great poets

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and thinkers of the time."[22] In Germany the *Kulturnation* preceded the political nation, or, as Meinecke calls it, the *Staatsnation*. Rogers Brubaker has recently reiterated Meinecke's central claim by suggesting that the concept of nationhood in Germany developed "as an essentially ethnocultural fact, prior to and independent of the state."[23] For a country experiencing the humiliation of the Napoleonic invasions of the early nineteenth century, national culture became a way of creating an identity inaccessible to and above politics. Friedrich Schiller expressed this idea in 1801, arguing that

> The German Empire and the German nation are two different things. The majesty of the German never rested on the head of his prince. The German has founded his own value apart from politics, and even if the Empire perished, German dignity would remain uncontested. This dignity is a moral greatness. It resides in the culture and in the character of the nation that are both independent of her political vicissitudes . . . While the political Empire has tottered, the spiritual realm has become all the firmer and richer.[24]

Schiller's 1801 speculation about the demise of the German Empire became true in 1806, when the Holy Roman Empire ceased to exist. As a result of that disaster, Johann Gottlieb Fichte echoed Schiller's thoughts, suggesting that "after recent events a German nation can probably exist only in the republic of letters."[25] It is during the late eighteenth century that we find Johann Gottfried Herder defining a national identity based on common language, tradition, and customs; and it is precisely during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as a sense of German national consciousness began to emerge, that historians and philologists began the intensive study and discoveries which led to a new understanding of German national history and hence of the German nation itself: the discovery of more than a thousand years of history dating all the way back to Arminius; the study of medieval epics like the *Nibelungenlied*, *Parzival*, and *Tristan*; and collections of folk tales like the Grimm brothers' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* [*Fairy Tales*] and Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim's *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* [The Boy's Magic Horn]. Aleida Assmann has suggested that in the process of German cultural nation-building, "the past is combed through for events and experiences that can serve as characteristics of identity and be established as markers of a common memory."[26] All of these discoveries – and inventions – helped to shape Germans' understanding of themselves as a culturally cohesive nation in spite of the

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ongoing fact of political division. Contemporary German Studies scholars have largely accepted this view of cultural nation-building. Describing the same phenomenon, Russell Berman has noted that in Germany, "literature became a privileged topic precisely because it was viewed as the vehicle that provided an ideal and cultural unity to the nation."[27] Anton Kaes has likewise suggested that with the decline of traditional folk myth and religion in the nineteenth century, literature became a vehicle for "the presentation, communication, and preservation of national identity," serving as a "collective memory over many centuries" and helping to articulate and preserve "the wishes, fears, and hopes of the Germans."[28]

None of this is particularly controversial, and few scholars would care to challenge the idea that the *Kulturnation* played a role in German nation-building well into the twentieth century, precisely as Meinecke contended. But what remains largely unspoken among literary scholars is the idea that the concept continues to have validity in the postwar period – and this in spite of the fact that politicians like Willy Brandt and writers like Grass and Günter de Bruyn have repeatedly invoked the concept in their own spheres. The Cold War antagonisms that Peitsch identifies have probably played a role here: neither of the two Germanys wanted to imagine itself as implicated in a larger cultural unity with the enemy that it continued to reject and revile. Precisely because of the essential similarity between the two Germanys, each state had to conceive of itself as fundamentally different at every level from its counterpart. The unspoken assumption or wish among scholars seems to have been that the German *Kulturnation* died along with the *Staatsnation* in 1945, as if Theodor Adorno's 1950 declaration that "culture in the traditional sense of the word is dead" implied that traditional notions of German cultural nation-building were therefore also dead.[29] And yet Adorno precedes his remark with a cautionary warning: if culture is indeed dead, no one knows about it, because "the word has not yet gotten out . . ." But if no one *knows* that it is dead, then what does it mean to proclaim the death of a socially constructed reality like *Kultur*? Adorno's words identify a paradox whose complexity seems to have been lost in the intervening years.

The idea that the German *Kulturnation* could simply have disappeared in 1945 would imply the continuing validity of a long since discredited belief that 1945 was a German "zero hour," a radical

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break with previous history, and that what followed after 1945 was somehow completely new and hermetically sealed off from contamination with what had gone before. As Bullivant writes, this myth was eventually "nailed" by left-liberal scholars in the 1960s and 1970s seeking to confront the ongoing legacy of the difficult German past.[30] However, part of that legacy was precisely the undead *Kulturnation*. That culture generally and literature specifically could be viewed after 1945 as guarantors of continuing German unity was demonstrated repeatedly in the postwar years, perhaps most memorably by Thomas Mann's public refusal to respect the border between East and West Germany during the Goethe celebrations of 1949, when Mann proudly declared in both Frankfurt and Weimar: "Who should represent and guarantee the unity of Germany if not an independent writer, whose real home . . . is the free German language, untouched by zones of occupation?"[31] A more pointed declaration of the writer's role in guaranteeing the unity of the *Kulturnation* would be hard to find.

That a nation can exist as a cultural unity in addition to or in place of politics is unique neither to Meinecke nor to Germany. In a speech delivered at the Sorbonne in March of 1882, Ernest Renan defined the nation first and foremost not as a geographic, racial, military, or dynastic unity, but rather as "a soul, a spiritual principle" characterized on the one hand by "the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories" and on the other by "present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form." Out of this mixture of the "rich legacy of memories" and "present-day consent" comes the nation itself as "a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future."[32]

Renan's definition gives voice to the fact that a nation is defined above all by a commonly recognized tradition which gains political force in the present. "To have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more – these are the essential conditions for being a people," he declares.[33] The French historian's definition suggests that national identity itself is dependent upon story-telling. Renan is perfectly open about the fact that this story-telling does not always imply historical accuracy, breadth, and consistency. As Renan writes: "Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress

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in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality."[34]

Culture is the primary way in which nations without political boundaries locate and identify themselves. While Renan makes it clear that even for politically unified nations culture is of vital importance, and while Meinecke identifies the concept of the *Kulturnation* at work in the *Staatsnationen* of England and France, both suggest that in the absence of a unified state, culture takes on paramount importance. Germany is Meinecke's case in point. Even though Germany's birth as a nation-state did not occur until 1871, Germans prior to unification had long since been aware of a common language and tradition. Renan refers to this awareness as "the work of a general consciousness, belatedly victorious over the caprices of feudalism."[35] In the absence of political unity the factors of language and tradition, as fundamental elements in Renan's "general consciousness," become doubly important in the process of nation-building.

Meinecke's concept of a *Kulturnation* is useful as a way of understanding not just the German division of the early nineteenth century but also the divided Germany of the postwar years. As I seek to show in the first chapter of this book, and as scholars such as Parkes, Peitsch, Müller, and Wehdeking have also pointed out, German literature in the late 1970s and 1980s increasingly began to address questions of German national identity, as if prefiguring the move toward political unification at the end of the decade, in much the same way that Meinecke saw Ernst Moritz Arndt and Fichte as both prefiguring and moving toward the 1871 unification of the German *Reich*. When, over a century later, the official state treaty on reunification declared that during the period of post-1945 German division "art and culture were . . . a basis of the continuing unity of the German nation," politics made a bow to culture in a way of which Meinecke and Mann would no doubt have approved.[36]

And yet, as I demonstrate in chapters two and seven of this book, many German writers during the decades leading up to German reunification rejected or denied the possibility of national unity. Indeed, the primary intellectual opponents of German unity in 1990 were writers like Grass and Christa Wolf. Moreover, large numbers of younger West German writers professed themselves uninterested in the eastern part of Germany specifically and questions of national unity and identity more generally. How does this widespread

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